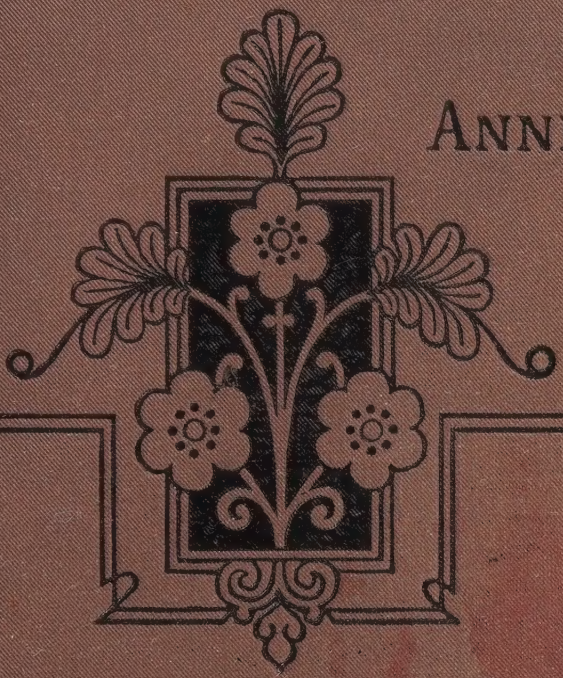
Charlie is My Darling



Anne Beale

CHARLIE IS MY DARLING.

VOL. II.

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CHARLIE IS MY DARLING

BY

ANNE BEALE

AUTHOR OF

'FAY ARLINGTON,' 'THE PENNANT FAMILY,' 'COURTLEROY,'
'SQUIRE LISLE'S BEQUEST,' ETC., ETC.

Bear through sorrow, wrong and ruth,
In thy heart the dew of youth,
On thy lips the smile of truth.
LONGFELLOW.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

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CHARLIE IS MY DARLING.

CHAPTER I.

FLO'S PRESENTS.

Flo's return brought pleasure to the farm. The day after, she and her nieces unpacked her treasures from abroad. It was pretty to see her lithe figure kneeling before her boxes, while the little girls waited upon her. They flew hither and thither at her behest. Marjory filled her chest of drawers with the articles Mamy carried to her, and the drawers were more neatly arranged than they might have

been had Flo herself been their settler. Flo had brought presents for everyone, and many ornaments for her parlour. As they turned up, the children were sent off with them. Their delight was unbounded. They were trotting up and down stairs all the morning: Mamy with a doll in her arms dressed as a Florentine peasant, and Marjory adorned with a Roman sash. A whole set of indescribable ornaments was arranged on Aunt Belle's tables, and a wonderful tobacco-box and smoking-cap placed on grandfather's chair against he came in from the fields. Weatherley was to be astonished by photographs and paper-knife, and the whole house was aroused by Molly's outcry when the children took her a Neapolitan apron.

'Aunt Flo says Ben will like that,' said demure Marjory, and Molly said she would keep it for Sundays, though people would think she was out of her mind.

'Flo, you must have spent all your money,' exclaimed Belle, joining the unpackers, and setting to work with them.

'Not quite, but I longed to buy lots more,' she replied.

She had forgotten no one. Miss Dulcey, Dolly, all the men about the farm were included in her munificence, and she contemplated making a tour of donations in the afternoon. She had herself received many presents which were all relegated to her parlour.

She was bright as the brightest and lightest of butterflies at dinner, and her father was charmed into good-humour. Not so Weatherley. Not even the photographs and paper-knife could remove the cloud from his usually open forehead. At home all his offences had been pardoned before the day on which they had been committed was over; but he perceived that his grandfather had not forgiven him

for a fault which he knew to be involuntary. He could not understand why he might not love the squire; forgetting that he had disliked him very much until circumstances had brought them together. Marjory tried to comfort him, but he would not be comforted. Belle confided the state of the case to Flo, who was inclined to side with her father. She had been offended more than once because the squire had not paid her the attention she considered her due when they had met accidentally at the vicarage or Mrs. Prendergast's, and so the politics of the farm became somewhat hazy. Moreover, she did not see why Weatherley should be adopted and the little girls neglected. Besides, with the fortune, they could ignore the squire.

She forgot all about them in her afternoon tour. She dispensed her favours royally, if not always quite judiciously,

and her niece Marjory, who accompanied her, said she was the fairy princess of some tale she had been reading. When they reached the Gables, Miss Dulcey greeted her with her usual outspoken warmth.

'I am glad you are safe at home again, Flo, and have not carried off some foreign marquis. But the foreigners are too wise to be run away with by penniless girls. You see I am up to the times, for women run off with the men now-a-days.'

'Yes, we are equal to any occasion,' returned Flo, nonchalantly, who always did her best to pay Miss Dulcey off in her own coin, and failed.

'So clever! I am quite *Mute*,' said Miss Dulcey, with an emphasis on the unfortunate name.

Flo started up with her face suddenly red.

'Now, Miss Dulcey, how have you got hold of that?' she cried. 'You must roam

the world at night, like the spiritualists. You know everything.'

'I correspond with Mrs. Prendergast; and, if you have a secret, never confide it to one of two female correspondents, for it is sure to make the grand tour.'

'I thought Mrs. Prendergast was above such gossip,' said Flo, magnificently. 'It is very unkind of her to write about me. She seemed my friend.'

'Our best friends are often least to be trusted, Flo. That is why I am so open-mouthed. Mine know everything concerning me, and a deal that doesn't concern me. Now, sit down and tell me all about him, and the foreigners generally, while Marjory goes and helps Ben to groom Miss Saucy.'

When Flo had confided her adventures to Miss Dulcey, that lady said she had no opinion of the Mutes, either by name or at

a funeral; indeed, she believed Flo's admirer had invented the name, and advised her to beware of him, if he chanced to turn up again. Flo was much offended, as she generally managed to be after a conversation with Miss Dulcey; but she was well aware that it was useless to take offence, so she assured Miss Dulcey that Mr. Mute was perfect, in spite of his name.

'Anyhow,' laughed Miss Dulcey, 'he can't follow me to the grave, for I've inserted a clause in my will, brief, but to the purpose—"No mutes, no wreaths, no crosses." Besides,' she added, more seriously, it is not safe for young men and young women to become intimately acquainted who know nothing of one another. I am not straitlaced; but I have seen a little of life, and there is generally something amiss where there is mystery.'

'You are quite mistaken. There is no

mystery,' said Flo, indignantly. 'Mr. Mute had many friends, and was in the best Italian society.'

'Indeed! What is his profession? I suppose he told you, since you were so confidential.'

'I think he is an artist, or a literary man, or a newspaper correspondent. He often took notes. He is exceeding clever and agreeable, and Mrs. Prendergast thought so. Why did she mention him to you, Miss Dulcey?'

'I suppose because it was through me that you became acquainted with her. She does not know your father, and looks on me as a sort of guardian. The fact is, Flo, that young ladies who accompany middle-aged widows as travelling companions should be very careful in making acquaintance with young men. Mrs. Prendergast is not so particular as many ladies; but I think it just possible that she

found you somewhat of a flirt, and, my dear Flo, girls in subordinate positions have no right to make themselves agreeable to the other sex.'

'Now you are joking, Miss Dulcey. I assure you I am not a flirt. I dislike most of the men I meet, they are so vain, and think themselves so irresistible that they are not worth the trouble of pleasing. But Mr. Mute is quite different. And he has such a fine figure and such a handsome face.'

'Oh, Flo! You are not improved. However, you are not likely to see your hero again, so I leave you with your impressions for the moment. I daresay Dolly and Marjory will effectually disperse them.'

'How cruel you are, Miss Dulcey! If I am not improved, you are not. Do you remember how you used to tease me when I was a child? And I am——'

Flo paused.

'A *fait accompli*,' supplied Miss Dulcey. 'A very flighty young woman, who should have a duenna to look after her, instead of two children to superintend. But never mind, Flo; put a good face upon it, and, when the fortune comes, who knows?'

'Yes, who knows?' repeated Flo, laughing and shrugging her shoulders.

CHAPTER II.

MULREADY AT THE FARM.

LATE that evening, after the little girls had gone to bed, and when the elders of the family, Weatherley inclusive, were at supper, an unexpected visitor arrived at the farm. Molly appeared with a mysterious air, and said 'Miss Belle was wanted particular,' so Belle left her father and the others to their surmises, and followed Molly.

'Mulready, station-master, in Miss Flo's parlour. He asked for you,' whispered Molly.

Belle, usually calm enough on any sudden emergency, lost her self-possession at this announcement. What could Mr. Mulready want at that hour? He usually came at tea-time, when able to leave his post; why should he appear so late? Poor Belle's thoughts flew to the returned bouquet; and she wondered if he had been offended and had come to inquire why she had sent it back. He was always such a kind friend, and supplied her with such a treasure of flowers, that she would not for the world have annoyed him.

She was all of a flutter when she opened the door and went into the room. Molly had lighted a candle, which burnt so dimly that she scarcely perceived Mr. Mulready at first; but he rose to meet her. His manner was unusually grave, but his shake of the hand long and warm. Indeed, he held her hand while he said that he had asked for her in preference to her father,

because he had news to communicate which he thought it best to tell her first. This preamble frightened Belle—as preambles always do when they preface matters of vital interest—and she exclaimed:

'Then it is not the nosegay! I knew nothing about it! Something is the matter!'

'The nosegay!' he repeated, with a half-smile. 'Oh, no! I felt that was a mistake. A cablegram has arrived for your father from—from Montreal. I came over with it myself, thinking how much he dislikes telegrams, and that I could let him know the contents without——' Here he paused.

'Charlie is either ill or dead,' said Belle, fixing her terrified eyes on Mulready.

'He is ill; I fear, dangerously ill. Sit down and let me read what it says.'

Belle sat down, too overwhelmed to resist.

'"Charles Dauncey seriously ill. Broken blood-vessel. Come or send.—Stint and Co." That is the message,' said Mulready, kindly, taking Belle's hand.

'My darling Charlie! Perhaps he will die! He should not have gone! What will become of us?' groaned Belle.

'It is all in God's hands, dear Miss Dauncey,' said Mulready. 'Will you, or shall I, tell your father? Some one must go at all risks, and there is no time to lose.'

'To Montreal!' exclaimed Belle.

'I think so. "Come or send" sounds imperative.'

'I will tell my father; you will wait,' said Belle, dashing a tear from her eye, the precursor of a flood had she not stayed it.

She returned to the dining-room, and said that Mr. Mulready had received news of Charlie.

'One of those confounded telegrams!'

cried her father. 'What's the matter? Say it out! I knew from his letter that he was worse than he said.'

Belle broke the news as best she could, and the consternation may be imagined. Weatherley ran off to Mulready, and returned with him.

'What is to be done?' asked Dauncey, in despair.

'Some one must go,' was the reply.

A consultation ensued, in which poor Weatherley put in his claim as son to see after his father; while Dauncey declared his intention of starting at once. Mulready believed that the boy would have more discretion than his grandfather, and perhaps, with his mannish ways, carry as much weight; but, of course, he was too young for such responsibility.

'I will start by the first train to-morrow morning, get to Liverpool some time in the night, and be off the next day,' said

Dauncey, decidedly. 'If I had gone first, instead of Charlie, this would never have happened. But I was over-ruled, as I always am. As next-of-kin I was the right person; and it is evident that Providence orders that I should see after the business myself. You must pack up a few things for me, Belle; and you will see after matters while I am away just as well as if I were at home—better, perhaps.'

Belle could devise no other plan. With tears in her eyes, she said she would do her father's bidding, while Flo stood with her arm on his shoulder, and Weatherley, with resolute face, confronted Belle.

'And what am I to do? He is my father,' broke in the lad.

'Help me to work at home, and to pray for him,' whispered Belle.

The boy's brow relaxed, and he gave a loud sob. He had been restraining his feelings just as his aunt had been. Mul-

ready took him by the hand and led him out of the room, saying that he wanted a word with him. Once more in Flo's parlour his grief gave way, and he sobbed out that he was sure his father would die, and that he should never see him again.

'And mother told me to take care of him,' he said.

Mulready comforted him by pointing out to him that the breaking of a blood-vessel, though serious, did not necessarily mean death; and that he must strive to be a stay to his aunts and sisters, while their natural supports were away.

'There is so much for you to do,' he argued. 'I have gone through it all myself, and understand what you have to bear. You must rouse up like a man, and help to keep things going at home while they are abroad.'

'I will!' cried Weatherley, with a determination that astonished Mulready. 'I

am ashamed of myself for giving way. May I consult you sometimes when I am in a fix? Aunt Belle is only a woman, you know.'

This sudden change of thought and schoolboy language was a relief to both, and when Belle came in she found her nephew and friend in earnest discourse.

'I am only in the way now,' said Mulready. 'If I can be of any use to you, let me know. Look on me as a true friend, Miss Dauncey. One born for adversity. I have gone through that thorny path myself, and know what it is. I will send over the fly in time.'

He held out his hand to Belle, whose repressed tears flowed gently at the kind words, while Weatherley took his arm and said, with his natural, resolute manner,

'We will take care of them all between us.'

Mulready smiled, and, saying that he

should be on the platform to receive Mr. Dauncey the next morning, hurried away.

As usual, everything devolved on Belle. With her heart breaking for her darling brother, she packed a large portmanteau with what she conceived to be necessary for her father's uncertain term of absence. She had scarcely time to reflect whether it were wise for him to go; but she saw no other course. They could not leave Charlie to die alone in a strange land. Her one comfort was that he had written of the kindness and hospitality of the Canadians, and she knew that he was sure to make friends because, as she said to herself, 'everybody loves Charlie.' She found Weatherley very helpful, and almost as good a packer as herself; indeed, there were few things that he could not put a hand to. Meanwhile, Flo entertained her father, and managed to amuse him, despite his grief. They were both of such volatile

natures that a chance word influenced them for joy or sorrow, good or ill.

'I wish I was going with you,' said Flo. 'I have been trying to persuade Mrs. Prendergast to visit America. You can go and be back in no time.'

'It is the money, Flo. I know not how we shall find it,' sighed her father.

'I wish I hadn't spent so much on presents,' returned Flo. 'But I have nearly five pounds left, and that will help. When you get to Montreal you will probably have tens of thousands. How provoking and contrary things are! Just when one wants money, one can't get it.'

'It has always been the same with me,' groaned Dauncey. 'Your mother kept me back when I had a chance of luck, and now Belle fetters me with her "bird in the hand."'

He was pacing the room according to custom, and Flo had her arm in his, now

restraining him, anon moving restlessly with him.

'Perhaps I shall be too late, after all,' he exclaimed, stopping suddenly.

As he did so, Weatherley came in and stood before him.

'Grandfather,' he began, looking him in the face, 'what am I to do about the squire? Perhaps father will be too ill to say what he wishes, and you are——' He paused.

'The next-of-kin,' suggested Flo.

Dauncey sat down. A stern expression settled on his irritable face for a moment.

'Come here, my lad,' he said. 'If your father dies, there's another reason for my hating Squire Weatherley.'

'But he could not help it, grandfather,' said the boy.

'Maybe not. But he could have helped him and your poor mother to money enough to keep the pot boiling, and so

have saved them the anxiety of straitened means, and perhaps have saved their lives. You are a 'cute lad enough, and know which side your bread is buttered; so you must make your own choice. I won't stand in your light; but, if you take up with the squire, you may say good-bye to me.'

'That I could never do,' said Weatherley, bravely. 'But I want to be educated so as to earn my living, and do something for father and my sisters. I love you, and I love the squire too. You have both been very kind to me.'

'Then choose between us,' cried Dauncey, with unusual energy. 'I'll have nothing to say to anyone that truckles to Squire Weatherley.'

'Then shake hands, grandfather, for of course I must choose you,' said Weatherley, very gravely. 'Tell dear father that it is not my fault if I can't obey mother,

and be dutiful to her father, as she wished. But I must tell the squire the reason—or —or—Miss Dulcey.'

'Do as you like, and let me hear no more of Squire Weatherley,' said Dauncey; only this time his voice trembled slightly.

'You must forgive me, grandfather. I only want to do what is right,' said the lad.

Flo put her arms round her father's neck, and with her most enticing of manners said that it would be glorious to have the Court to look forward to; but not even Flo could shake Dauncey's implacable enmity, in which personal pique mingled. He took Weatherley's hand, however, and drew him towards him.

'You are a fine fellow, and I'm glad that the squire can't get what he wants for once in his life,' he said, rose hastily, and went in search of Belle.

He found her and Molly trying to strap

his portmanteau. Molly disappeared, and he and Belle were left alone together. He had a salutary fear of Belle, though he rarely owned or showed it, for he knew that no man ever had a more devoted daughter.

'What are we to do, Belle?' he began, giving way to some sort of despair that suddenly took possession of him. 'I suppose I am an old man, and if anything happens to Charlie I am afraid I shall never get back alive. You and Flo will do very well without me. She is sure to get a husband, and you must marry Pearce. As to the children—well, I hope the squire won't get hold of 'em.'

This idea roused him from his despondency, and he began to talk of money. How was he to pay for his journey to Canada? How maintain himself there until he proved his next-of-kinship? How bury Charlie if he died?

'Oh, father! pray don't talk so! I shall never be able to keep up,' said Belle. 'You must take the quarter's rent, which is ready, and we must try to sell the hay, and—but we need not speculate. We are sure to be protected under so many adverse circumstances: for He who binds on the burden knows how to loose it.'

Dauncey was a religious man, in his own estimation, at least, but not a Christian according to Christ's teaching. He could not realise that trouble and pain were man's heritage and education, and therefore kicked against the goad that he had not strength or power to cast off. He nurtured feelings of hatred against a man more forgiving than himself; not because he really nourished 'murder in his heart,' but because he felt it a sort of duty to withstand one more powerful than himself; and he speculated whenever he could, in the hope of redeeming what he had al-

ready lost by similar ventures. He was essentially a proud man, and we all know, or ought to know, that pride and weakness are well-nigh synonymous.

Belle knew all this right well, and had a difficult task to wade through it and bring the sterling worth which lay at the bottom of her father's character up to the surface. She loved him dearly; indeed, without the love she could not have laboured. Love makes labour light.

'I would go with you, dear father, but there is so much to do at home,' she said, as between them they clasped the last strap of the portmanteau.

'My dear child, you would only hamper me,' he said; 'I shall get on well enough when once I am started.'

The start was made at daybreak. Mr. Mulready sent over the fly, as he promised, and Dauncey was ready for it. So was Weatherley, who was to accompany him

to the station. Belle knew that she was wanted at home, and that the little girls must be told of their father's illness: and Flo was just aroused sufficiently to rush downstairs in her dressing-gown, and wish her father good-bye.

Belle had given him the treasured quarter's rent, and Flo her five pounds, so that he had just money enough for the journey. He was quite persuaded that before he returned he would be the acknowledged owner of a huge fortune, so he left the future to take care of itself. The parting was very sad, and many tears and prayers followed him and Weatherley as the fly drove off.

'Don't cry so, Miss Belle!' said Molly, who stood beneath the porch with the sisters to watch the departure. 'Mr. Charlie is a deal stronger than you are thinking.'

'Thank you, Molly, I shall be better

soon,' replied Belle, hurrying up to her room.

'You will be helping her now, Miss Flo,' continued Molly. 'She need be a horse or a ass, or one o' they 'viathans of the Scriptures, to stand master and all the worry. She do slave just so much as if she was a born blackamoor.'

'Oh, Molly, of course I shall help her!' said Flo. 'You must tell me what to do. I can shell peas, and cut up kidney beans, and do lots of things.'

'Better be teaching the little girls, and taking them off Miss Belle's hands. No knowing if they won't be here for good and all.'

Flo was startled by this idea. She hated teaching. If only Mr. Mute would appear, perhaps something agreeable might happen. Her mind turned readily from impending troubles to possible pleasures, and she was comforted. The rooks

began to caw in the castle trees, the sun shone out, the peacock strutted towards her. She dried her eyes, and suddenly remembered that she was not dressed—at least, that she was only half-dressed—so she pinched Molly's bare, red arm, and hurried after Belle.

She found her on her knees in the children's room. They were sleeping well, and were literally in each other's arms. Marjory's protecting arm was thrown over Mamy, whose angel face nestled close to her sister's. Flo's momentary brightness was obscured at once. She knelt down at Belle's side, and silently prayed for the sleeping children and their father. She knew how they all loved Charlie, and suddenly realised the possibility of his never coming home to cheer them with his gentle presence. She was very impressionable, and the sight of the children, with Belle kneeling by their bedside, caused her to

break out into tears and sobs, which aroused Marjory, and turned unselfish Belle's attention to her.

'Why are you crying, Aunt Flo? Is dear father worse?' asked Marjory, sitting up with a scared face.

She woke Mamy by this movement, and thus the little ones and their elders were face to face.

'How did you hear?' asked the acute Marjory.

Belle kissed the children and bade them get up, as it was quite late; but Marjory was not to be put off, and inquired again what was the matter. Mamy's 'Don't ky, Aunt Flo,' completed the need of an explanation, and Belle gently told them that their grandfather was gone to be with their father, who was not so well.

By degrees the truth eked out, and the question, 'Will he ever come home again?' had to be answered.

We need no words to bring the scene before the imagination of their friends.

Marjory seemed to understand the situation perfectly, and set herself to comfort Mamy, who did not understand it, but who began to sing 'Tarlie is my darling,' which she had learned from Belle, and which she was always singing.

'You are more of a woman than I am, Marjey,' said Flo. 'We will not cry any more, but try to be good until father comes back. He is sure to get well.'

'Fader tome back,' echoed Mamy.

Breakfast was a melancholy meal, or would have been but for Mamy, who, by some strange intuition, connected her father's illness with Weatherley, and asked if he had gone to the squire's to tell him about him. She was always talking of the 'pretty lady,' and enquiring when she should see her again. She had taken a

fortunate fancy for her great-aunt, Miss Weatherley.

News flies fast in a country village. Ben heard that the station fly had actually come to Hollyfield by daybreak, and had carried off Mr. Dauncey and his grandson. He communicated this to the maids, who in turn informed their mistress, and no sooner had Miss Dulcey finished her breakfast than she ran quickly down the steps and the hill, and athwart the paddock, despite the turkey-cock, to learn what had transpired. She was immediately surrounded by her younger friends. Her brisk, incisive manner always put people either in spirits or on their mettle, and she soon infused some of her own decision into them. Although she had her fears for Charlie, she would not let them appear, but said, with uncompromising cheerfulness,

'We mustn't meet trouble half way. There's nothing in telegrams nowadays.

And, as to the Atlantic cable, I don't believe it is to be depended upon, any more than the telephone or any other monstrosity. People think nothing of breaking a blood-vessel in these fast times. I wonder they retain one unburst in their bodies. Cheer up, Belle. You must keep your spirits up for all our sakes. I have great faith in Charlie's power of rallying.'

'So have I, Miss Dulcey,' cried Flo, ever ready to change from grave to gay. 'I saw him once in London—you remember, Marjey?—almost at the point of death, and he got better.'

'So he did,' rejoined Marjory, cheerfully, and 'So he did,' repeated her sweet echo.

When Miss Dulcey got Belle to her self, she told her not to be anxious about the rent, as she was sure that matter could be settled. 'Be anxious for nothing,' she added, and poor Belle promised to strive

against an unusual fear that beset her in spite of herself, and so the morning wore away; at least, its early hours, until Weatherley's return.

CHAPTER III.

SYMPATHY.

The inmates of the fly maintained a solemn silence for some time. Mr. Dauncey was not inclined to talk, and Weatherley did not know what to say. He was afraid of giving offence to his grandfather, who, he knew, did not understand him. He felt that from his first arrival he had been a sort of laughing-stock, because he carried a cane like a man and had mannish ways. He had striven to correct this, though he did not see the harm of it. He had been a sort of protector to his

family, and had been appealed to even by his father for his opinion ; and he was much humiliated by being put down, as he continually was, by his grandfather. Still, he was not born to be snubbed, he thought, and meant to assert himself when necessary. Indeed, he began to imagine himself of some importance, even in the country, when made a bone of contention between two rivals. But he was not thinking of these matters, which seemed secondary when trying to summon courage to speak to his grandfather, and when reflecting on his father's serious illness. He was thinking of what he could do to help at a time when he perceived that help was needed. Ever since he could recollect, he had been thinking similar thoughts, and perhaps no budding genius, whether in the sentimental, prosaic, or scientific school, originated more useful ideas. At last he burst forth suddenly with the words,

'Will you tell father that I will take care of Marjory and Mamy? He needn't be afraid for them. And tell him that we all love him dearly, and pray for him, and are almost sure that God will let him come back to us. Tell him that I am going to offer myself as a clerk or anything to Mr. Pearce, so as to help Aunt Belle. I should not mind being a shoe-black, if I could do that. Of course if you get the fortune it will be all right; but, while you are settling it out in Montreal, there are a lot of us to keep at home!'

'For goodness sake hold your tongue, boy!' cried Dauncey, on whom this unintentional home-thrust took effect. 'There's no doubt that the fortune is ours; but what we have to think of now is to save your father's life. Everything else, fortune inclusive, may go to the dogs if we only do that.'

'Yes; but the rent must be paid,' said

Weatherley, slowly and thoughtfully. 'And we children have such appetites; and Aunt Belle can't do everything. May I just tell the squire about father?'

'The squire again! Tell him what you like, but say we won't be beholden to him for so much as a crust of bread.'

'But if Aunt Belle can't pay the rent?'

'Then he may sell us up, and we shall all go into the workhouse.'

'Oh, grandfather! I promise to try not to offend you; but, if dear father is well enough, ask him what he wishes me to do. You see, I am the eldest, and shall have to work, as dear mother used to tell me.'

'You will drive me out of my mind, child! Here we are, I am thankful to say, and there's Mulready waiting for us, looking over his hedge of sunflowers, and we are ten minutes too soon, thanks to his exactitude.'

Dauncey was out of the fly almost be-

fore it pulled up, and was shaking hands with the station-master. He had great confidence in him, and wondered, as everybody else did, what could have brought him to Orchardson.

'There is just time for you to swallow a cup of coffee,' said Mulready. 'I daresay you have had no breakfast.'

'He didn't eat a morsel,' said Weatherley.

Mulready hurried them into his parlour, where a coffee-pot stood on the hob. He made Dauncey take a cup of the comforting beverage, and eat some bread and butter. He saw how haggard and worn he looked. In a few minutes the train arrived.

'Give my love to father, and tell him—' began Weatherley, and the rest was choked by a sob.

'God bless thee, lad! Do for the best,' said Dauncey,—a sentence which relieved Weatherley's mind.

When the train was gone, Mulready took him into his parlour, and made him breakfast with him. But, before they sat down, he had to strive to comfort the lad.

'I don't know what will become of us if father dies, we love him so!' the boy groaned out.

'You will then have two fathers in heaven instead of one,' returned Mulready, gently. 'But we will hope that his life will be spared. All is in God's hands, and He does all things well.'

'That is what dear mother used to say,' said Weatherley, and his voice and face cleared. Hope and trust were his watch-words and safeguards.

Moss, the boy-of-all-work of the station, looked in to see if his master wanted anything; and Jack, a fine colley, was watching outside the door, to announce the next train with a bark, as was his custom;

while a witchlike black cat sat on Mulready's knee. Weatherley remarked that all his surroundings were neat and pretty, and wondered how he and Moss managed to keep them so. As if guessing his thoughts, his host told him that a good woman, who lived at a neighbouring cottage, came in and out continually to 'do for him,' as he laughingly expressed it, and that she was in his tiny kitchen at that time. Besides, he said, all the children knew him, and he never wanted for help when he needed it. Weatherley greatly admired him, and considered him as a sort of Robinson Crusoe cast upon the desert island of a railway platform. He enjoyed his coffee and a plate of cold tongue, and by the time they had finished breakfast was cheered in a way unaccountable to him. The fact was, that while eating and drinking he made a confidant of Mulready, who listened to all his plans

with evident interest. He was, however, careful not to mention the conflicting views of his two grandparents. He had an innate sense of honour, which prevented his compromising anyone.

'By all means make friends with the squire, and avoid Pearce, the lawyer,' said Mulready, just as Jack uttered a sharp bark, to inform him that the distant thunder of an incoming train was audible.

Mulready was instantly on the platform, but as he had issued no tickets he knew that there were no passengers from Orchardson. As it happened, none got out, so that he was able to gather a nosegay for Belle, of geraniums, calceolarias, petunias and the like, for it was early autumn.

'Here are my two biggest sunflowers for your little sisters. Tell your aunt I shall make cuttings for her of my scarlet geraniums.'

'You like Aunt Belle?' said Weatherley, interrogatively.

'Who does not?' replied Mulready, with a smile.

He put his flowers into a basket, and said he had a few minutes to spare, and would walk a little way with Weatherley. He improved the occasion, as people say, by giving him good advice. He saw at a glance that the boy was honest, truthful, intelligent, and self-reliant; but he saw also that he was impulsive and somewhat conceited.

'If you want a friend, come to me,' he said, when he took leave of him. 'I was left to my own devices when nearly as young as you, and know something of the world.'

'Thank you,' returned Weatherley, and hurried on, swinging the basket.

'Take care of my flowers!—they are an old bachelor's children,' cried Mulready.

The hedges were now covered with traveller's-joy and other autumnal treasures, and Weatherley relaxed his pace to admire them. He began to wonder what the Montreal hedges would be like, and to recall the many American stories he had read. Then he bethought him of his poor father, and the buoyancy of youth suddenly went out of him. He sauntered on with a sort of listless abandonment, which everyone feels now and then, and which is especially sad for those usually energetic.

'What was to become of them all?' he asked himself. 'If only he were a man he could support the whole family, but now his powers were limited by boyhood.'

Depression at that age is not common, and should not be encouraged, either by the individual or his pastors and masters. It certainly was not natural to Weatherley, and he felt very miserable indeed. He looked so, moreover, and his misery found

the usual relief. He began to cry, and, being in a lonely road, he was not so much ashamed of himself as he would have been had spectators been at hand. He was suddenly aroused, however, by the brisk canter of a horse. He glanced up, and, to his delight and confusion, saw the squire. He was longing to see him again, but not with these childish tears on his cheeks. As the squire pulled up he tried to pull up also, and to resume his usual manner.

'What's the matter?' asked the squire, anxiously.

'Nothing—yes—something!' stammered Weatherley, scarcely knowing what to say. 'My father is very ill in Canada, and my grandfather has just gone to look after him. I have been to the station to see him off.'

The squire, who had a kind heart beneath what people chose to call his pride,

was off his horse in a moment, and shaking hands with the boy.

'Tell me all about it. When did you get the news?' he said.

'Last night, by telegram. "Broken a blood-vessel. Come at once," it said, and Mr. Mulready brought it over himself. Poor father is so delicate that we are afraid——' here again Weatherley could not repeat what they feared.

The squire looked distressed, but could not bring himself to comment on Charlie's state. He inquired, instead, if there were any news of the 'next-of-kin.'

'Because,' he added, 'Mr. Dauncey's personal statements might have weight.'

'Grandfather said that money and everything else might go to the dogs if only father could get well,' replied Weatherley. 'I wanted to see you, sir, to ask if you would wait for the rent. Aunt Belle

had it ready, but grandfather was obliged to take it to pay his passage.'

'It is not due until Christmas. What did he say about my proposal to educate you?'

'He—he said I might choose between you; but if I chose you I must give him up,' stammered Weatherley.

'Old fool!' ejaculated the squire. 'And what do you mean to do?'

'I could not leave him. He was always very good to us all in London, and now he is keeping us in the country. You would not think it right of me, would you, if I did?' said Weatherley, looking into his face.

The squire was puzzled to answer this question. Many qualms were tormenting his conscience at the moment, and he was thinking of the boy's mother, and his own animosity towards the Daunceys. He replied by another query:

'What reason did Dauncey give for such a selfish, irrational decision?'

Weatheley paused before he replied, but, being truthful by nature, he spoke honestly at last.

'He said—I cannot remember the exact words, but he meant that he would not have anything to do with any one who—well, who had taken no notice of father and mother, or—or—us children, while we were poor.'

The squire turned away from the boy, ostensibly to loosen the rein he was holding, and to allow his horse to pick at the hedgerow grasses. He looked pale and stern, and his lips quivered. A fight was going on between his good and bad angels—by which we mean his two natures—and neither we nor he could tell which conquered. He glanced at Weatherley kindly as he said,

'The fault is not yours. Let me hear

what your father decides. I suppose you will abide by what he says, which will be, probably, influenced by the gain or loss of this fabulous fortune. Your grandfather seems to think he has the best right to it, as he probably has; but those contested fortunes generally swallow themselves up, so that nothing comes to the claimants. Are you anxious about it? What would you do with it if it came to you?'

'I should not know what to do with it, sir; but I daresay grandfather would, because he owes a lot of money. He is very anxious about it, but Aunt Belle dreads it, because, she says, it would put us in a false position. Besides, she does not know if it has been honestly made, and would rather spend one honest penny than a thousand she knows nothing about. So would I.'

'Your father seemed to think differently. He went off in a great hurry to put in your claim.'

Weatherley's countenance changed at this allusion to his father. His own mind was full of doubts that he could not explain even to himself, much less to another; so he said, simply,

'You don't think it wrong of father to go after what he believes to belong to him?'

'By no means. I think him and your grandfather quite justified in putting in their claim, though they might, perhaps, have been in less hurry, and have written first. Is your father excitable, like your grandfather, or rather is he irascible?'

'Oh, no; father is the most peaceable man you ever saw. Only you see, sir, he is so delicate that he is afraid he will not be able to support us, and mother used to say that made him nervous.'

Weatherley was scarcely conscious of

the effect the mere mention of his mother had on the squire. On this occasion it was unfavourable to the father for whom he was unconsciously pleading, since had he been worth anything, Mr. Weatherley thought, his Amy could not have alluded to his nerves to their children. He had known Charlie as a young practitioner who had been once or twice to the Court, in place of Mr. Blyth, and had rather liked him; but, although he was at that time well acquainted with Mr. Dauncey, he knew little of his children. Subsequent events had, as we have seen, closed all intimacy.

'Let me know your father's mind as soon as he has made it up,' he said. 'I daresay I shall see you and your sisters at the Gables. I suppose they have not forbidden your receiving a gift from me? On second thoughts, my sister will let me

know about your father. I hope he will get better. Good-bye.'

The squire put a sovereign into Weatherley's hand as he shook it; hastily remounted his horse, and rode off at a rapid pace.

The interview had revived the boy's spirits, and the sovereign seemed a mine of wealth. He picked up his basket and walked briskly homewards, hopeful once more.

He found the house besieged with visitors within and without. The news of Charlie's illness had spread, and been even magnified into his death. The villagers came by twos and threes to inquire, and Molly had more than she could do to attend to them.

'Name o' goodness, don't be stopping my work!' she was saying, when Weatherley appeared, and the inquirers turned to him for information.

It was pleasant to him to know how

much beloved his father was, and how much respected his grandfather, in spite of his failings.

'God help 'em both! God bless 'em! They've kind hearts, and never turned their backs on a poor man,' were the thrice-blessed words often repeated.

'None of us will ever do that,' said Weatherley, with more pride than he fancied, and they shook hands all round.

'What an incessant shaking of hands!' some critic will say.

There was more of it when Weatherley entered the dining-room, for he found Miss Dulcey, Mr. Burmester, Dolly, and Mr. Pearce there. What brought Pearce nobody knew but himself. The fact was that he had received a few lines from Dauncey, sent by purpose messenger from Harborough station, informing him of the state of affairs. Flo was the only member of the family present. Just as Weather-

ley came in, Miss Dulcey was enunciating a favourite theme, as she almost knelt in the window-seat, and watched the people as they came and went.

'I pray to die in the country. If one dies in town nobody cares a halfpenny for it. One's next-door neighbours go about their business just as if there was no solemnity close at hand. 'Tis a hearse, and nothing more; unless, indeed, it is full of flowers. Then they say, "What a beautiful wreath! What a magnificent cross! Those flowers must have cost a fortune." Now here, at Hollyfield, from old Betty Bond down to Dolly there, everyone would be exclaiming, "Miss Dulcey's gone, poor dear! What a loss we'll have! Nobody 'll fill her place," and the corners of the aprons would be quite wet. Why, the whole village has come to inquire about Charlie.'

'So much respected,' put in Pearce.

'Not a bit of it. 'Tis love for one's neighbours. Remember, Mr. Burmester, wherever I die, I mean to be buried at Hollyfield, so that Betty Bond, Dolly, and the rest of 'em may shed a few honest tears over me. Eh, Dolly?'

'How you do talk, Miss Dulcey!' said Dolly, who took it all literally. 'Nobody could do without you.'

The appearance of Weatherley turned the conversation to inquiries about Dauncey's departure.

'How did he bear up?' asked Flo, with clasped hands; she was always inclined to be dramatic, and would have liked to go on the stage—so she thought.

'He went off all right,' replied the more matter-of-fact Weatherley.

Miss Dulcey laughed, and went in search of Belle. Mr. Burmester and Dolly took their departure soon after, and Flo was left alone with Pearce the lawyer; for

Weatherley also carried off his basket of flowers to Aunt Belle.

Pearce was an admirer of beauty as well as worth, so he made himself agreeable to Flo during the absence of her sister. She was by no means indifferent to the well-dressed and dapper little man's complimentary speeches, and for the moment forgot her anxieties, to indulge in polite banter, or, as it is pertinently expressed, in chaff. She was an adept in this superficial game; and threw herself into it without counting either gain or loss. They played at it for some time, when Pearce interrupted it, by saying, as he looked at his watch,

'The fact is, Miss Flora, I came over to ask your sister if I could be of any use in this emergency. I have an appointment at two. Would you mind asking Miss Dauncey if I could have a few minutes' conversation with her? I know how

much engaged she must be; but it is important.'

As Flo left the room, Pearce muttered,

'She certainly is one of the most elegant and attractive girls I ever saw in my life.'

CHAPTER IV.

MULREADY AGAIN.

'My own true blue Belle! making the best of things,' said Miss Dulcey, when she found her god-daughter alone.

Belle and the little girls were busy in the kitchen, preparing a currant dumpling for dinner. They had consoled one another, and Molly had helped by assuring them that she had often seen Master Charlie as bad as bad could be, and yet he got quite well.

'I am so glad to see you, Miss Dulcey,' exclaimed Belle. 'I was going to write,

but I knew you would hear of our fresh trouble, and come to me.'

'Of course. But you have heaps of sympathetic friends. Flo is entertaining one, as you probably know.'

'Yes. What can he want? Money, perhaps.'

At this moment Weatherley appeared, with his gift of flowers for Belle, and the two huge sunflowers for her nieces.

'Mr. Mulready sent them,' he said. 'He was so kind. He gave me a jolly breakfast, and cheered me up, and told me he would be my friend if I wanted one.'

'He is always kind,' said Belle.

'You must bring those sunflowers to the Gables, children,' put in Miss Dulcey, 'and show them to that obstinate oaf, Ben, who will declare that ours are just as fine.'

'They are almost as large as the sun,' said Marjory. 'But then we know the

sun is millions and millions of times bigger, only it is so very far off that it looks little to us. Do you know about the sunflower, Aunt Dulcey? It is a Bible flower, you know, because here are the crown of thorns, and the nails, and the glory, and everything of the crucifixion. Aunt Belle showed them to me.'

Marjory was about to explain the mystical glories of the flower, when Flo interrupted her with Mr. Pearce's message to Belle.

'I cannot see him. I know what he wants. He believes in this fortune, and will lend us any amount of money on the strength of it,' cried Belle. 'If it is a failure, he has us entirely in his power.'

For once Belle spoke unadvisedly before the children, who listened, and took in what she said.

'He is very civil, I am sure,' said Flo.

'And it will not quite do to offend him,'

added Miss Dulcey. 'I will come with you, though I daresay I shall annoy him before I have said a dozen words.'

'That is kind!' cried Belle.

'It really is, for I hate the sight of a lawyer,' returned Miss Dulcey. 'He can't propose before a third person,' she added, in the passage, 'and I shall know what to say to him about the next-of-kin better than you will. How d'ye do, Mr. Pearce?'

Pearce was anxiously looking for Belle, and was not as much honoured as he might have been at being first greeted by Miss Dulcey. However, he assumed his best manners, and said how distressed he was to hear of Charlie's illness, and how glad he should be to be of service at so critical a time.

'You will want advice on business matters, Miss Dauncey, and I hope you will command me,' he added.

'I know more about Jabez Dauncey

than anyone else, except Belle's father,' said Miss Dulcey, 'and he will be on the spot. Perhaps this illness of Charlie's may be a good thing after all, as it takes Mr. Dauncey out to tell his own tale. I am a believer in Providential care, you see, Mr. Pearce, and think nothing happens by chance. I daresay you are like half the men of the present age, and only believe in what you see. Agnostics, I hear they call themselves. Are you an Agnostic?'

Miss Dulcey fixed her penetrating eyes on Pearce, who attempted a smile, and said he was not an Agnostic, for he believed in the ladies, whether he saw them or not. Here he cast a meaning glance at Belle, who coloured, and asked if any particular business had brought him over, for, if so, it was unfortunate that her father should have left home so unexpectedly.

'I came on no special errand, but I

wanted to know the last news from Montreal. I had a letter from Stint and Co., requesting a certificate of Jabez Dauncey's birth, and we cannot find it in the registers at Monkston, where he is said to have been born.'

'May I inquire, without seeming over curious, who is to pay for all these lawyer's letters?' asked Miss Dulcey. 'They are not written for nothing, and, unless Mr. Dauncey prove his claim, we all know he can't pay them.'

'Of course the estate will be charged with legal expenses. All will proceed according to law.'

Miss Dulcey laughed her peculiar, half-amused, half-sarcastic laugh, and said she wondered how the law got anything out of an estate when there was no estate.

'We all know the old story of the lawyer who ate the oyster, and gave the two shells

to the rival disputants; but, when there is no oyster, what's to become of the lawyer's claim?' she asked.

'He generally knows what he is about,' returned Pearce; 'and in the present instance I believe Mr. Dauncey is tolerably secure of the fortune, if no son turn up.'

'But if the son should turn up, and he is disappointed, what about the lawyers?' persisted Miss Dulcey.

'They must take their chance. Virtue is usually rewarded,' replied Pearce, with a meaning look at Belle.

Miss Dulcey understood him, and inwardly resolved that his virtue should not be rewarded according to his desires. She remained until he took his leave, and then told Belle that the sooner she got rid of him the better. Belle feared he had too strong a hold on her father to be got rid of, and said so.

'Then the sooner we all set to work to earn our living the better. Flo must begin at once,' said Miss Dulcey.

She summoned Flo, and bade her come with her and see Mrs. Burmester, who wanted to settle at once about Dolly's education. Flo was beginning to protest against unseemly haste, just as they had heard of Charlie's illness; but Miss Dulcey would take no denial, and carried her off to the vicarage much against her will. She was sure she could not teach, she argued; but all she got in return was that she must try.

Good Mrs. Burmester was so kind and sympathetic that she overruled all her scruples, and, in less time than it takes to write, Flo was engaged as daily governess to Dolly, and Marjory was to study with her. But for practical Miss Dulcey, this would have been under consideration for days, and perhaps weeks, but she put her

foot upon it, and it was done. She hated dawdlers and dawdling.

'No more Mutes and foreign tours at present,' she said, with satisfaction.

And so Flo began her work the very next day, to the great delight of Dolly and Marjory and the amazement of everybody else, Belle especially.

It was fortunate that the engagement was made, for an event happened a few evenings after that entirely upset Flo's equanimity. Mr. Mulready again made his appearance at the farm. At first he was received with a sort of terror, since he was supposed to be the bearer of another telegram from Montreal; but this fear was groundless. He asked for Flo, and was ushered into her parlour, where she received him alone. As it happened, Belle was out. Mulready admired the room. He wanted to gain time. At last he

began upon the business that had brought him.

'I have a message for you, Miss Flo, from an acquaintance—I might almost say, from a friend of mine—Mr. Mute.'

Flo started and looked surprised; then, recovering herself, asked what the message was.

'He arrived at Orchardson this morning,' continued Mulready.

Flo almost jumped from her seat in delight, exclaiming,

'Why did he send you? Why did he not come himself?'

'I cannot say; but the facts are these,' said Mulready; and as it took him a long time to tell them, owing to Flo's constant interruptions and questionings, we will detail them more briefly.

Mulready was on the platform when the down express arrived, and was surprised

at being greeted by one of the passengers, who got out at Orchardson station. He did not recognise him at first, but slowly perceived that he was an old acquaintance. They had known one another abroad, before he came to Orchardson, but had since lost sight of each other. It was Flo's admirer, Mr. Mute. He said he was taking a holiday in England, and, having made her acquaintance abroad, had determined to pay her a visit on his little tour. Mulready suspected that Flo had made a conquest, and thought that a stranger at the farm would increase Belle's anxieties. He did not say so, however, but invited Mr. Mute into his sitting-room while he settled as to whether he would walk or take a fly. Mulready, who was hospitable, soon placed cake and wine before him, and they began to talk about the Dauncey family. Mute made many inquiries, but they ceased when Mulready said that Mr. Dauncey was gone

to Canada—ceased, that is to say, only to be resumed on a different tack. Mr. Mute said he was going to the farm with a view to making Dauncey's acquaintance, and inquired what had taken him to Canada. Mulready related the story of the next-of-kin, and Charlie's illness. He added that the inmates of Castle Farm were naturally in great distress. On his saying this, his companion rose suddenly and said he had changed his mind, and should return to town by the next train.

'Will you do me a favour, Mulready?' he said, in a strange, unsteady voice. 'Will you go for me and tell Miss Flora Dauncey that I was coming to call upon her; but that, hearing she is in so much trouble, I will defer my visit for the present. I shall still hope to see her again, though I cannot say when.'

Mulready said he would do so, but thought Mute had better take the message

himself. This he decidedly declined to do, and waited impatiently for the up-train. Mulready was obliged to attend to his work, so there was no time for more conversation; indeed, Mute was in such a state of excitement that conversation was out of the question.

'My kindest remembrances to Miss Dauncey. I shall hope to see her again, and you too, Mulready,' were his parting words as he stepped into the train.

Fortunately for Flo, she took offence at these proceedings. She had a good stock of pride, and could not believe that a man would so suddenly change his mind for any but worldly motives. So she completely masked her feelings from Mulready, and said, half-scornfully, that she was sorry he had had so much trouble, and still more sorry that Mr. Mute should have gone out of his way to land upon Orchard-

son platform, instead of some more picturesque spot.

'How did he get such an awful name?' she asked, nonchalantly. 'Who is he? Nobody seemed to know anything about him abroad.'

'He is a very nice fellow, clever and gentlemanlike; that is all I know of him,' replied Mulready.

'You need not repeat the ridiculous message. I will tell my sister,' she said, as Belle came in. 'There is nothing the matter, Belle. No telegram; so don't be alarmed.'

'How kind of you to come and see us!' said Belle. 'We will have supper directly.' And she and Mulready were happy, if Flo was not.

But when Mulready took his leave, and Flo communicated to her sister the real cause of his visit, Belle discovered that Mr.

Mute had made a deep impression on the volatile girl, despite his name. Her pride, however, stood her in good stead, for she maintained the *rôle* of stoical indifference so completely that no one, save Belle, could have imagined that any deeper feeling lay beneath.

'I quite understand,' she said. 'He fancied that I was somebody until he came to Orchardson. He did not know that I was only a companion to Mrs. Prendergast, for she always treated me as a friend and equal; and of course I made the best of our position, and used to magnify the Dauncey descent. Probably Mr. Mulready said we were farmers, and nothing more, whereas I gave him to understand that we merely lived at Castle Farm, because my father liked the country. I assure you I did not tell a falsehood, for you know he hates farming.'

Belle would have sympathised, but Flo

brooked no sympathy. She begged her to believe that she had only amused herself, and could never have married a man of the name of Mute. Indeed, she laughed as she pronounced it, and Belle said gravely that, if a mere name could separate friends, it was best as it was, and she was glad he had not come to Castle Farm. This irritated Flo, and gave Belle an insight into her real mind.

There was so much trouble to meet, however, that Flo's conquests seemed of comparatively little importance, and before the following day was over Belle had almost forgotten Mr. Mute. But Flo rode the high horse, and was so unlike herself that everyone asked what was the matter with her. Her change of mood was attributed, not unnaturally, to anxiety about her father and brother, and Belle alone suspected that she was chafing under an imaginary insult and disappointment. She

requested Belle to write and ask Mr. Mulready as a personal favour not to mention Mr. Mute's visit, for she dreaded that the news of it should reach Mrs. Prendergast and Miss Dulcey. She went to the vicarage in her capacity of governess, and was so sharp with her pupils that Dolly and Marjory were quite frightened, and when she took them for a walk she was so silent that they believed she was angry with them. Disappointment takes people in all sorts of ways, and it certainly did not improve Miss Flo.

There was great excitement at the farm that afternoon, while Flo was on the back of that high horse which she rode so uncomfortably. Scarcely had Mr. Dauncey's sudden departure caused more astonishment, for the excitement was occasioned by the arrival of Miss Weatherley. Molly was breathless when she told Belle that the squire's carriage was actually passing

through the brown gates, and she nearly died of syncope as she ushered Miss Margaretta into Flo's parlour.

'I should like to see Miss Dauncey alone,' said that lady to Molly, and Belle, not less surprised than Molly, went to her at once.

Belle was always neat, and did not require to change either her dress or manner for a chance visitor, whether from court or cottage. Miss Weatherley was more nervous than Belle, and was some time before she explained the reason of her visit. She remarked on Flo's pretty room, and said it was much embellished since she had seen it last, which was before Charlie's marriage, and inquired for Flo, and asked various questions, to which Belle duly responded. Finally, she dashed into her actual business. Dashed is not, perhaps, quite the word, for she hesitated as she made the leap, and we all know that 'he who hesitates is lost.'

'I have to apologise, Miss Dauncey,' she began, 'but my brother—well, my brother sent me with a message for you'—a pause. 'Two or three mornings ago he met our—well, his grandson, you know, to whom he has taken a great fancy. His name is Weatherley, I believe, doubtless given to him by his poor mother. He is quite confidential with my brother, and told him of the anxiety you are under at present on account of your brother's illness, and your father's departure. He added something about the rent, and I have come at my brother's particular request to beg that you will be under no anxiety on that head, but will pay it when you can, or not at all, if you will do him the favour to accept it as a small contribution towards the maintenance of his grandchildren.'

Miss Margaretta stopped short here, and glanced at Belle as one that was asking not granting a favour. Her white curls

and white feather shook nervously, and she evidently dreaded a refusal as a suppliant does when not sure of success. But Belle was neither proud nor hard; she did not think it either grand or magnanimous to refuse a benefit, nor did she usually find it difficult to accept one. But this was so unexpected, and so strange, that she was overcome by surprise and gratitude. The strain on her feelings had been great ever since that fatal telegram, and she had been obliged to keep them under for the sake of others; now the tension gave way, and the tears, so many days restrained, broke forth. She could only stammer out a blurred confusion of thanks, which made Miss Margaretta more nervous than she was before. She was seated on the couch, and rose and fell back more than once before she spoke the simple words,

'Come here, my dear.'

Belle went to her and sat down by her

side. The kind lady took the girl's hands, kissed her cheek, and muttered something about 'grandchildren,' and 'the squire's duty,' and 'poor, dear Amy,' which increased Belle's emotion. She mastered it, however, and with her own frank, natural manner, said,

'Oh, Miss Weatherley, will you thank the squire a thousand times? We could not pay the rent now, for my father was obliged to take it for the voyage. We shall be able to pay it, I hope; but, if not, I will accept it for the children, if I may. I think such a kind act must overcome my father's prejudices. Under all circumstances, a present weight is taken from my mind.'

'I fear you have many weights to bear, my dear. Dulcey often tells me about you, and I should have shown more sympathy but for my brother's——well, his—you understand. May I see the children?'

This turn of thought was good for Belle. She went off at once, and returned with Mamy. Marjory was at the vicarage, Weatherley could not be found. No sooner did Mamy perceive who it was that wanted her, than she gave a joyful little cry, and once more endangered Miss Weatherley's laces by casting her tender arms about her neck.

'Oh, the darling!' exclaimed this, her great aunt. 'If I could only be spared to bring her up as I did her mother, I should be thankful to Almighty God.'

'Dod,' repeated Mamy, suddenly folding her little hands, as she was wont to do at the mention of that sacred name.

'She has been taught reverence,' said Miss Margaretta, bowing her head.

'All the children seem naturally reverent and affectionate,' returned Belle.

Perhaps there is nothing in human nature more convincing of its complex

character of good and evil than the affection of the young for the old. Mamy's spontaneous love for Miss Margaretta was a type of this, but not so unaccountable as the love of the infant for the veriest hag with whom it is brought in contact. Neither infirmities nor wrinkles destroy this—not even cruelty. It was not extraordinary that Mamy took possession of the seat in Miss Margaretta's heart left vacant by her mother. To conceal an agitation which was both praiseworthy and natural, she turned to Belle with inquiries. They tumbled one over another in her nervous haste, and Belle answered them almost as rapidly, for she was much overcome by the interview.

She said that her father had both telegraphed and written from Liverpool before his voyage, but that they had received no further news of her brother; that Flo was at the vicarage as daily governess; that

Weatherley was making himself useful both indoors and out; that Marjory was so steady and painstaking that she was having a good influence on Dolly; and that they would be able to get on now the squire was so kind. From the present there was a sudden transition to the past, and Belle recounted all she knew of the life and death of the dearly beloved niece Charlie's wife and the children's mother. Both she and her questioner had difficulty in restraining their feelings, particularly when Mamy put in a word from time to time when her father's name was mentioned; her mother she did not remember.

'I am detaining you,' said Miss Weatherley at last. 'If I can be of any service to you or the children, will you do me the real favour of letting me know? Trouble loosens the heart-strings, and I am sure my brother would help you if your father would let him. Not that he has said

as much to me. I was surprised at his asking me to come here to-day with the message, for he never names any subject connected with poor Amy; at least, he never has done so until the children came into the country. Providence cast the boy in his way, and will, I believe, work more miracles. He is already less reserved with me, and, if I could only overcome my reserve, we might help one another. But we were born too much alike. It has done me good to open out to you.'

As there seemed nothing more to say, Miss Margaretta took her leave.

CHAPTER V.

NEWS.

A VERY depressing cloud hung over the farm during the interval between Mr. Dauncey's departure and the period when a letter from Montreal might be expected. Belle and the children, to say nothing of Molly, did their best to lighten it, but Flo only added to its gloom. The bright, lively, volatile Flo seemed a changed person, and no one but Belle knew the reason. She scolded, argued, petted by turns, but nothing got the better of Flo's scornful reserve. Everyone else attributed the change

to anxiety about her brother, but, anxious though she undoubtedly was, the root of her malady lay elsewhere.

'My dear Belle, you are quite mistaken; I don't care a straw for him,' she said one evening, when the day's work was done, and they were together in the parlour. 'But I do care for having to teach. It is really an impossible task. Oh, yes, the children are very good; at least, they are better than I was when a child; but that doesn't say much for them. They are quite afraid of me, which is very amusing, when everybody said I should never have authority enough. Marjory is fearfully persevering, and keeps Dolly up to the mark in a way that would divert me, if it were not all so matter-of-fact and dull. I was not born for a teacher.'

'What were you born for?' asked Belle. 'I suppose none of us are sent into the world for nothing.'

'I suppose not; but I haven't found my vocation, unless it is that of travelling companion; and even then, between ourselves, I hated knocking under. Naturally, Mrs. Prendergast took the lead, and I followed obediently, but I always wanted to be first.'

Belle was amused with this naïve confession, but would not lose her opportunity of striving to bring her sister to reason, by enlarging upon it.

'You must do something, Flo, and nothing offers but teaching. Mrs. Burmester says you are a very good mistress——' began Belle.

'Mistress! schoolmistress! She surely could not have used so objectionable a term,' interrupted Flo.

'She probably said teacher; but I didn't learn her words off by heart. If you would have a little patience, and not think it necessary to alter your manners and act

like a tragedy queen, just because you have made a mistake about a perfect stranger, you would find teaching more easy. I must speak out, dear, because this is no time for indulging in pique or imaginary grievances. We have to look life in the face, and to see, perhaps, the shadow of death behind it. Oh, Flo, do be reasonable, and forget this passing fancy. A few hours, or at most a day, used to be time enough to heal all your wounds. What has altered you so?'

'A tragedy queen! Somebody abroad said I was rather like Ellen Terry,' said Flo. 'I wish I were on the stage. But you are really mistaken, Belle. I hate that——name. I was going to say man, but I despise him too much to hate him. I will be a better girl, and try to consider the scholastic art as the highest of any. To train children for——you know the rest, Belle, and I am sure it is highly

praiseworthy. But I must be allowed to do it my own way, and to be successful I must be severe. If I were to relax ever so little, I should lose my authority, and "obedience, instant obedience," is the secret of training children. I read that in a book, and endorsed it from my own experience. I am a failure, because no one insisted on my obeying.'

To Belle's relief, Flo smiled. She was so unlike herself that she was puzzled as to her real state. She only wished that she could bring her to a more natural condition.

'Only tell me if this Mr. Mute actually proposed for you?' she asked.

'He merely said he would "ask my father,"' replied Flo, with a provoking attempt at a laugh. 'But he is what people call "beneath contempt," so pray let me forget him. I will turn over a new leaf in the teacher's calendar to-morrow,

and win Dolly and Marjory's attention by love, not fear. Isn't that what one ought to do? Where are the children?'

She ran off, and Belle followed. They found them by the dining-room fire, Mamy on Weatherley's knee, and Marjory at his feet. They were talking by the firelight, and the words that reached Flo were—'Aunt Belle says God can bring dear father back.' They were spoken by Weatherley, and went straight to Flo's heart and conscience. She was thinking only of self and her own grievances. She joined the children, and was distressed to feel that Marjory shrank from her.

'Are you afraid of me, Marjory?' she asked.

'Yes—a little,' replied the child, hesitating.

'Dolly and Marjory say you are quite different to what you used to be, Aunt Flo, ever since you have taught them,'

put in plain-spoken Weatherley. 'I say you are quite right, for girls must be kept in order.'

'You know nothing about it, sir. To-morrow it will be their turn, and they are to keep me in order. What do you say to that, Marjory?'

'It will be great fun; but how are we to do it?' asked Marjory.

'Weatherley, who knows everything, he is so clever, he will tell you. Now, Weatherley, how are they to do it?'

'Like this!' cried the boy, jumping up and pinioning Flo, which caused a shout of very salutary laughter, and convinced Marjory that Aunt Flo was severe only during school hours.

It need scarcely be said that she was severe no more, but, Mrs. Burmester feared, far too indulgent.

The following morning Mr. Pearce again arrived at the farm. He was unusually

early. Belle was obliged to receive him alone, for Flo was at the vicarage, and there was no Miss Dulcey at hand to shelter her. He said he brought good news, which instantly overcame Belle's reserve and restored her natural manner.

'Then Charlie is better!' she exclaimed. 'When did you hear? Who has written?'

'The letter is from Stint and Co. The good news concerns rather the next-of-kin than your brother. Here it is.'

Belle took the letter presented to her. It was brief and lawyer-like. It said that the business was progressing satisfactorily, and that it seemed clear that Mr. Charles Dauncey was the next-of-kin of his cousin, Jabez Dauncey. The certificate of his birth was necessary before the matter could be finally settled, and the presence at Montreal of the actual heir-at-law desirable. The writer added that they hoped he would come in answer to the telegram, as

Charles Dauncey, son, was in such poor health that he was scarcely capable of transacting his father's business.

'I have succeeded in finding the place of his birth and baptism,' said Pearce, rubbing his hands complacently and looking at Belle, who was thinking only of her brother, and not of Jabez Dauncey's fortune. 'I have telegraphed to that effect, and to say your father is on the road.'

Poor Belle, who was comparatively indifferent to that distant fortune but was alive to present expenses, asked, in terror, how telegrams to America were to be paid for when there was no money.

'There will soon be plenty, my dear Miss Dauncey,' said the triumphant lawyer. 'The certificate sent; your father on the spot; the letters of Jabez Dauncey, as a boy, to your grandfather; the corroborative testimony of Miss Dulcey, Squire Weatherley, and numerous others

to his identity—there could not be a clearer case, and it is evident that Stint and Co. think it so. Without being vain, I consider that I have not managed it amiss; and, if you all become Crœsuses, you will owe it in the main to me.'

'And Charlie!' ejaculated bewildered Belle. 'And the money for your expenses, Mr. Pearce—and the telegrams—and the liabilities out there?'

'Mere drops in the ocean. And you know how you can amply repay me for my outlay, and cancel mortgages and money loans, and expenditure of time, by a word. Whether this next-of-kin be finally proved or no, and whether your father turn out a millionaire or a pauper, that word from you would save him from much anxiety.'

'I don't quite understand what you mean by a pauper, Mr. Pearce?' said Belle.

'It was merely a *façon de parler*. If this

next-of-kin is not finally proved, I fear your father's debts and various liabilities would scarcely be covered by his assets. You have been a wonderful daughter, and have kept off the evil day for some time; but we know how careless he is, and how readily imposed upon.'

'Yes,' interrupted Belle, 'I know how he borrows money at high interest to pay off any pressing debt, however trifling. I know that you have often lent him money, Mr. Pearce.'

She said this naturally, and without meaning to give offence, but the lawyer fancied it intentional.

'That is part of my profession, Miss Dauncey. If a client wants money, and asks me to supply it, I do so on mortgage or otherwise, according to my ability. The risk is great, and we must indemnify ourselves for possible loss.'

'Like the pawnbrokers. I understand,'

said Belle, with more of malice, perhaps, than she thought.

'A poor comparison indeed. Still, as solicitor or pawnbroker, I am always your devoted slave, and I wish for a decided word of encouragement from you before I proceed in your father's affairs.'

There was an unpleasant ring in Pearce's voice as he spoke these words, and Belle was conscious that she had given offence. She had not wished to do so, though she could scarcely have spoken her mind more unpleasantly.

'Forgive that stupid word,' she said, frankly. 'I am too anxious about Charlie to think of anything else. He must be very ill; and it is so far—so far—that I cannot go and nurse him. You would understand if you had a sister who loved you as I love him.'

'I understand you only too well, and appreciate your straightforwardness and

unselfishness. I have done so long, and you know it. The crisis has come, and I must declare——'

A little tap at the door, and a childish voice, crying 'Aunt Belle,' interrupted the declaration. Something always did interrupt Mr. Pearce's interviews with Belle, and he wished sweet Mamy at any distant part of the hemisphere when Belle opened the door and admitted her. She had been crying, and explained her grief by holding up a battered doll, and saying, 'Lily fall down and hurt her arm.' Never did injured doll meet with more gracious reception. Belle stroked the disjointed member, exclaiming, 'Poor Lily!' and comforted Mamy, somewhat to the envy of her admirer. The prospect of the unlimited American fortune, as well as a really sincere appreciation of Belle, had made him resolve that he would make a *bona fide* proposal that very day, and, not

being nervous, he opened the matter as above reported, and was vexatiously interrupted by Mamy.

'Would you send the child away, and let me continue with the proposal I was about to make?' he said, with a frown on his good-looking face.

'Not to-day, Mr. Pearce. I cannot listen to or resolve on anything with the illness of poor Charlie on my mind. Not all the fortunes of all the Americans put together could interest me now, nor could any proposal about mortgages or loans, however kindly meant. Charlie is evidently very ill, and perhaps father may not arrive in time. Thank you for bringing me the news; but everything seems indifferent to me except his life—or—or——'

Here poor Belle could restrain her feelings no longer, and her tears fell on the golden curls of the child on her knees.

She feared she would never see again the brother she loved so dearly. Pearce was not by nature sympathetic, but he tried to explain that he was very sorry for her, and really felt it.

'Thank you,' she replied. 'You must forgive my weakness, and excuse my leaving you.'

She rose, held out her hand, and left the room with Mamy and the mutilated doll in her arms. Pearce looked after her, and wondered whether she had really understood the true sense of the impending proposal or not. Molly appeared instantly, and took cake and wine from the side-board, saying that Miss Belle hoped he would have some.

'She do have too much upon her, sir,' added Molly. 'Are you thinking as Mr. Charlie will be dying over there at the end of the world?'

'I hope not—I think not,' responded

the lawyer. He swallowed a glass of wine, and went in search of his horse.

Belle soon regained composure when alone with Mamy, whose innocent prattle was always her best restorative. She went about her work, wondering whether the post would bring her a letter from Charlie. It might, she thought, if he were able to write, since the mail had brought Pearce one. As the postman walked and had a long round to make, he was often late. She took it for granted that Weatherley was watching for him, and waited with such patience as she could command. Mr. Pearce had evidently started from Harborough immediately after breakfast, and it was not noon when he left Hollyfield; so the postman had not arrived. As Miss Dulcey said, they were still commendably slow at Hollyfield.

Mamy was asleep and sucking her thumb in her little bed, and Belle was seated at

the bureau trying to make up her father's unaccountable accounts, when Weatherley did actually bring a letter. Yet he did not come with the buoyant assurance of happy news, but with slow step and saddened face.

'It is from father, Aunt Belle; but the direction is so shaky that I scarcely knew the writing,' he said, putting the letter into Belle's hand.

'Still, it is from him,' she said, with a thankful heart, for her misgivings were great.

She opened it, and laid the sheet before her on the bureau. Weatherley, with his arm round her, leaned over her, and both read, silently, the following lines:

'My dearest Belle,

'Although I am very ill, and forbidden to use a pen at present, I must reply to your letter about the

dear children, and their grandfather, Squire Weatherley. I am thankful that he is interested in them, and that he proposes to educate Weatherley. How thankful my darling Amy, now in heaven, would be—and perhaps is! We sinned against him, and, if you have the chance, tell him we repented. But we dearly loved each other. Let him do as seemeth him best for the children. I know he will do what is right, and you will be partly relieved from a burden too heavy for you to bear alone. You have been so good to us all, dear, that you are sure to be directed aright. For myself, I leave all in the hands of my merciful God and Saviour. The doctors say I am better, but I feel very weak, and sometimes think I shall not see you or the darling children again in this world. But my faith fails not, and I believe we shall meet in a better, through the Cross—only the Cross. And I long to see my Amy

again, whose last word was, as you know, "Jesus." May it be mine and yours. In Him is our only hope. I am counting the days, almost the hours, till the time comes that may bring father. I receive nothing but kindness. Mr. Stint has taken me into his house, and his wife nurses me almost as you would, dear Belle. What have I done to deserve it—I, who have been always so weak and erring? Kiss the dear children for me over and over again. Tell them to be good, and then we shall soon meet again—soon! for life is very short. I am exhausted, and can only add love to your dear self and everyone, from your ever affectionate and grateful brother,

'CHARLES DAUNCEY.

'P.S.—Lose no time, and let me hear.'

The readers of that letter spoke no word.

They could not. Weatherley only clasped his aunt ever more and more closely, as if to express his feelings, while her slow large tears fell on the sheet. It seemed to both like a sentence of death. And, oh! how they loved the writer! No greater love ever existed between brother and sister, father and son, A sentence of death. Perhaps he was already dead. The writing was indistinct, the conclusion suggestive of failing power, and for the contents, they appeared almost prophetic. He made no reference to himself when he gave his father-in-law permission to do what he chose for Weatherley, and took all responsibility on himself, not even alluding to his own father.

'Oh, if he had never gone to America!' sobbed Weatherley, at last. 'I cannot bear it. Indeed, I cannot bear it.'

'It is his own writing and signature,'

gasped Belle, with a mighty effort. 'He may be better.'

But no effort sufficed to restrain the grief, for there was a tone in the letter which sounded like a knell to its readers.

'We must be brave and hope,' said Belle. 'We have much to do. We have to work for the others, and we must not give way.'

'No; I will try. But I shall not care for anything if father——' Here the poor boy choked.

It was noticeable that neither he nor Belle even thought of that fortune for which he had left England. As they grew calm, they talked over the letter, and especially the postscript, which they had scarcely noticed before. They were to 'lose no time' in carrying out Charlie's wishes, and to let him hear the result. There was comfort in the thought that he had not, at least, given himself up, or he would not

have requested an answer. Sentinel Hope stood at the door of their hearts, and they let him in.

'He may recover, Aunt Belle,' said Weatherley.

'The Lord is sufficient for all things,' returned Belle. 'But we must not lose a moment. Let us take the letter to Miss Dulcey and ask her advice.'

She hastened into the kitchen and bade Molly see after Mamy; there was no one else to think about now, and then she and her nephew started for the Gables. They found Miss Dulcey at luncheon, and she, perceiving that there was something unusually amiss, insisted on their eating before they discussed it.

'One sees things so differently before and after dinner,' she said; but she soon discovered that her guests could not eat, even to give her pleasure.

She took them to her sanctum, and Belle

gave her the letter to read. She was wise enough to conceal what she really thought of it, and restricted herself to rapid comments on the business part.

'Charlie is wiser in his generation than I took him to be. He is right to take the matter in his own hands, before his father reaches him. He must be better, or he could not have written such a letter at all. Why, Belle, you are generally the one to sustain; you mustn't give way, or there will be an end to us all. I'll take the letter to the Court at once, so that you may set Charlie's mind at ease as soon as possible. A mind at ease is half recovery. "No time to lose." He is right. Tell Ben to harness Miss Saucy, Weatherley.'

Weatherley went, and left Miss Dulcey and Belle together for a short time.

'This ill wind is blowing for good in my brother's direction,' said Miss Dulcey. 'He and your father, who have been a pair

of mules, must come round. Fight as we will, Providence overrules, as He does in all this science. Dear Belle, you must take heart. Mrs. Burmester says Flo is doing capitally, and there is no reason that Charlie shouldn't recover. How did Margaretta manage to say her say ?'

This turn of thought was good for Belle, so was a sudden order to 'stir up Ben, while I put on my things,' which sent her to the stables. The day was as gloomy as herself, and an early frost had cut Miss Dulcey's geraniums and calceolarias, which drooped their heads much as she felt her spirit droop. But Ben's grumbling questions as to how he was to be ready at everybody's call roused her, and she told him that his friend Charlie had written, and that this sudden visit to the Court was caused by his letter. He was pacified at once, and bestirred himself. She and Weatherley returned to the house, and

had ere long the melancholy satisfaction of watching Miss Dulcey drive off, with Charlie's letter in her pocket.

CHAPTER VI.

PROPOSALS.

'Well, Ben, I'm thinking there's trouble enough without making more,' said Molly.

'And enough's as good as a feast,' returned Ben.

These philosophical opinions were spoken at the front door, while Miss Dulcey was talking rapidly in the dining-room. Ben had been complaining, according to custom, and wondering how he was to rub down Miss Saucy, and finish up his work at midnight. It was already dark, for Miss Dulcey had remained long at the Court,

and had forgotten to tell Ben to drive home while she went to Castle Farm. She had been so much preoccupied, indeed, that she had scarcely spoken to him at all; which was a grievance, for, although he was a silent man himself, he liked to be talked to —to take all and give nothing, in short. This tendency caused him to exclaim,

'Well, Molly, you may so well say something.'

'Say it yourself, Ben,' replied Molly.

'Then, what do you think about poor Master Charlie?' asked he.

'That he'll never be coming back again, and that, as likely as not, master and he'll be lying together out there at the world's end. They ought never to 'a gone,' she said, and began to cry.

'Now, don't 'ee cry, Molly, there's a dear,' said Ben; and he left Miss Saucy's head, and sidled up to her. As a rule, men are annoyed at the tears of the softer sex;

but Molly was not given to emotion, and he felt, as he said afterwards, 'as if his heart hev up to his mouth,' at the sound of hers, for he could scarcely see her. Sympathy is a rare pick-lock, and opened the nailed-up souls of that irascible pair with an ease that astonished them both.

'Don't 'ee cry, Molly,' repeated Ben. 'If they don't come back, you'll still have me. I've got a nice cottage, you know.'

'You have, Ben. But Miss Belle and the children—what's to become o' them?' sobbed Molly.

'Oh, there's Miss Dulcey, and some'at be brewing between her and the squire, or my name bain't Ben. Now, don't 'ee cry, but say "yes," there's a dear.'

Everybody would not have understood to what Ben wanted that affirmative; but Molly did. She had been expecting to be asked to say it for years. She was, how-

ever, as Ben said, 'very contrarious,' and replied in half terms,

'Thank 'ee, Ben. A friend in need is a friend indeed, and if Miss Belle shouldn't be wanting me, and if they're not coming back, and——'

'All right,' said Ben, hurrying back to Miss Saucy, who was getting fidgety.

'I am always saying to Miss Belle that you are caring a sight more for Miss Saucy than for me,' said Molly, offended.

'I'm not so sure,' said Ben.

While they were settling this weighty question, Miss Dulcey, Belle, Flo, and Weatherley were talking over the events of the day. The little girls had gone to bed.

'I always knew my brother was as good as most men, for they're all sinners,' said Miss Dulcey; 'but I never knew how good he was till to-day. He turned right away from me when he read the letter, and didn't

speak for some time. "Well, brother," I said, when my patience was at an end. "Well, Dulcey," he replied, with a choke in his voice. "We make many mistakes in this life, and I have made mine." Then I knew that he was sorry, for I never before heard him acknowledge himself wrong. Some people can't, poor fools; just as if they forget that at the last day we should know all about one another in no time.'

'Ah, Miss Dulcey!' ejaculated Flo: 'I never thought of that.'

'And I'm not quite sure, Flo. But 'tis better to make a clean breast, both to God and our neighbour, before that time comes. However, my brother was much troubled about poor Charlie, and said he would promise to provide for all the children, if that could comfort him. As to Weatherley, his wish to educate him had been already expressed. "But," he said, 'I

could not take the boy away during Dauncey's absence. I must have a talk with him, and I hope with his son, first. Tell Miss Dauncey that I hold myself responsible for his education and maintenance from this time forth; but I would not wish to hurt her father's feelings by removing him before his return, unless he also give permission." Now, Belle, I felt proud of my brother when he said that. He is a gentleman all round.'

'That he is!' cried Weatherley, enthusiastically. 'And I hope I take after him, for I could not leave the farm while we are all in such trouble and uncertainty.'

'My brother asked about the next-of-kin, and, when I told him what Pearce said, he seemed to think there would be no need of his help if your father's claim is established. But I don't believe in the lawyers; though it must be owned that Stint and Co. have acted like good Sa-

maritans in taking Charlie in. There are two meanings to that, however.'

'Charlie doesn't name the money,' said Belle; 'and he would scarcely have written exactly as he did if it were likely to be settled. I wish no advertisement had ever appeared, and that we had been left to struggle on in peace.'

'That is not like you, Belle,' said Miss Dulcey. 'We may not fight against Providence, though I must say we are not always an obedient army of martyrs.'

'But for the advertisement,' put in Weatherley, 'we children would not have come here, and I shouldn't have seen the squire, and everything would have been different.'

'What's done is done,' said Miss Dulcey, decisively. 'But here's something either to do or not to do. My sister Margaretta wants to have Mamy. She has fallen violently in love with the child, and I am

not surprised, since she resembles her mother. Charlie gives the squire carte blanche, and, if Mamy could be prevailed upon to go, I see no reason against it, since Weatherley and the squire were the only parties Mr. Dauncey objected to join together.'

'Mamy is always talking of the pretty lady,' said Belle. 'I will think it over.'

Poor Belle felt as though her power of thought had forsaken her. But they continued to discuss these questions some time longer before Miss Dulcey took her leave. When she did so, the little party went with her to the door. But for the lamps in the pony-carriage, darkness would have been visible and nothing else; as it was, Ben and Molly were just discernible seated between the lamps. They were settling all their differences on Miss Dulcey's cushions, and, when the hall door suddenly opened upon them, Flo declared

that she saw Ben remove his arm from Molly's waist. There is less than a step between tears and laughter, and Flo forgot her troubles for a moment, when she said to Molly, who scrambled out of the carriage,

'That is thoughtful of you and Ben; you have been keeping the cushions dry. Miss Dulcey, you needn't be afraid of taking cold from the dew.'

'It seemed as if you was never coming, mistress,' growled Ben. 'There's no holding of Miss Saucy in.'

Molly had disappeared, so Miss Dulcey's rejoinder lost half its intended force.

'Never tell a lie, Ben. You know you were making love to Molly. There's no harm in that.'

'What fun! They must have settled it at last!' said Flo, as they watched the pony-carriage disappear down the rough drive.

But not even her volatile nature could prolong the jest; and when, subsequently, she perceived that Molly's eyes were red, she feared that the 'settlement' could not have been amicable. As to Belle, her heart was too full of sorrow even for smiles. She was, besides, undecided as to what course she should take. Weatherley decided for her when she returned with him and Flo to the parlour.

'We needn't settle anything till we hear from grandfather,' he said. 'We may have a letter from him in about a week. How slow time is! It seems a month since he went away. Isn't the squire kind? Father is sure to come back and thank him, and then we shall all be friends. We must wait, Aunt Belle.'

Wait! Yes, they must wait, and precipitate nothing. Her life had been spent in waiting, she thought. Whose life is not? The difference is that some people

wait patiently, others impatiently; but 'all comes to those who can wait,' says the proverb. She was willing to wait God's time, but it was hard to wait when so far away from those for whom she waited. The events of the day had overwhelmed her. When she tried to recapitulate them to Flo, she said that surely a year had been compressed into those few hours. They sobered even Flo as she commented upon them; but it relieved Belle to listen to her comments and have her sympathy, and above all to be shown the hopeful side.

'Dearest Belle, if you get down-hearted all will be over with us,' said Flo. 'How fortunate it was that you prevented Mr. Pearce's proposal, if you don't like him! There is nothing so disagreeable as to have to decline an offer. Then, if this great fortune comes to us, it won't matter if you refuse him by-and-by, because we shall be

able to pay off all his horrible bills and mortgages. As to Charlie's letter, I don't take your view of it. He is always despondent, and has been at the point of death more than once. The writing was not more shaky than I have seen it before. And he must be stronger than one thinks, or he could never have taken heart to decide about the squire and the children. I look upon that as a miracle, for I never remember his coming to a decision without consulting half-a-dozen people.'

'He knew that Amy wished it, and would not hesitate,' broke in Belle.

'What a mercy it is, dear! Under all circumstances, the poor children will be provided for. The squire does the right thing at last, thanks to his fancy for Weatherley. I can't see that he has acted nobly at all; he is merely doing his duty. I would certainly let Mamy go. That dear old fossil, Miss Margaretta, will leave

her all her money, and she won't have to seek her fortune as companion or governess, like poor me. And perhaps somebody will marry her; for I assure you, Belle, one's personal charms, and all that sort of thing, are greatly heightened by a little gilding. Don't scold me, dear; Mr. Mute—odious name!—has convinced me of that. I really believed in him, and, strive as I will, I can't get over his deceit.'

It was now Belle's turn to argue, and it did her good to remonstrate with her wayward sister. The remonstrances were interrupted by a tap at the door. This alarmed them both, for they had retired for the night, and the hour was late. Flo ran to the door, and, opening it nervously, saw Molly. She exclaimed, and asked what was the matter.

'Nothing, Miss Flo. May I come in?' said Molly?' who was partially undressed,

and had covered her deficiencies with a long cloak. 'I can't be going to bed, Miss Belle, and I 'ouldn't sleep if I did, till I am telling you that Ben and I have agreed to keep company, if you've no objection.'

'I am very glad, Molly. Sit down,' said Belle.

'Hurrah! was that what you were doing in Miss Dulcey's carriage? For shame, Molly!' cried Flo, forgetting her own love affairs in Molly's more matter-of-fact communication.

'Now, Miss Flo, there's nothing to be joking at. 'Tis very sarious. "We've known one another a long time, Molly," says he. "Let's go to church next Sunday, and have the banns put up." "No, Ben," says I, "we'll be having no banns while Master Charlie's ill, and Miss Belle is wanting me. We'll be keeping company, and nothing else."'

'You've done that a long time at a distance,' said Flo, demurely.

'True for you, Miss Flo. And it 'ould a-lasted all our lives but for Mr. Charlie. I was crying over him, and Ben tries to comfort me. I couldn't a-believed he had such a feelin' heart. But I am not going to be married so long as you are wanting me, Miss Belle.'

'Thank you, Molly. You have been very faithful to us, and I hope you will be happy,' said poor Belle, to whom this disclosure brought only more anxiety, for what could she do without Molly?

'Ben's a tidy man,' replied Molly, reflectively; 'but I am caring most for you, Miss Belle. And, if we do marry some day, I can come here charing whenever you are wanting me.'

Belle and Molly shook hands over this proposal, and so the long day with its numerous events came to an end.

The following week dragged through somehow. Work helps us to get over time, however slowly go the wheels of his chariot, and everybody was obliged to work at Castle Farm. Belle and the children all wrote to Mr. Dauncey and Charlie. Flo wrote for Mamy, a charming little letter full of childish pathos, and Belle gave her brother the history of the squire's offers and Miss Dulcey's mediation. They all did their best to write cheerfully, but none succeeded save Marjory, from whom her father's critical state had been concealed. She and Dolly were the brightest bits of colour in the sombre picture.

Although they knew that a certain time must elapse before they could hear of Mr. Dauncey's arrival at Montreal, they were always watching for the postman. Even Mamy had taken to following Weatherley, to see if there were any letters, and when one arrived she brought it triumphantly to

Aunt Belle. They were generally either business missives or friendly inquiries; but towards the end of a week one came that was important enough, and Mamy little knew what issues hung upon the contents of the envelope she carried, when she said, 'Letter for 'oo, Aunt Belle.' Belle bade the child sit down on her little chair and play with her doll, while she read it. She knew the writing well enough; it was Mr. Pearce's, and she took it for granted that it was a business communication. Still, she trembled as she broke the envelope, for Pearce's letters were generally about money. This, however, was on a very different subject. It contained a proposal of marriage, couched in very straighforward terms. She could no longer pretend to misunderstand him, or put off the evil day by excuses: she must decide for or against the writer. She had done this already; but it was one thing to have said to herself

over and over again, 'I could not marry Mr. Pearce,' and another to have to write the words to him. Nothing could be kinder or more delicately managed than the proposal. Mr. Pearce said that he had been about to make it verbally more than once, but had always been interrupted; therefore he decided to write. He had chosen a time which might seem inopportune, because he felt that Belle needed an adviser who was interested in her as he was, to help her in a crisis that might be favourable or fatal. If she accepted him, he would gladly cancel all the liabilities to which she had alluded when they met last, and free her and her father from present anxiety. The future was still uncertain.

She believed him sincere in his protestations, though she wondered that he took that particular moment to make them. She also knew that there was no one living who had such power over her father as

he had, or who could so completely ruin him if he chose. She had never been sanguine about the 'next-of-kin,' and had seen enough of money matters to know that fortunes were often swallowed up in the expenses incurred to try to secure them. In short, Belle was eminently practical, and believed in nothing that promised future wealth. She had been too often disappointed. She had seen so many prophetic visions of her father's blown like bubbles to the wind, that she had learnt the invaluable lesson of living by the day.

But here was an opportunity of looking ahead for once in her life. If she accepted Mr. Pearce, she would secure competence for herself, immunity for her father, and possibly a home for Flo in an emergency. The children were provided for, and, if it pleased God to spare Charlie, he could at least recruit at the farm till an opening was found for him. Here her reflections

took a turn. Engage herself! Marry! while the life of that dearest of brothers hung by a thread. She could not do it if she loved the man, and certainly she could not if she did not care for him.

She was seated at the old bureau, her elbow on it, her head on her hand. The letter was before her, Mamy at her side purring over her dolly, and Molly was clattering about in the kitchen. Weatherley came in. This possible heir of the Court had been digging potatoes, and was about to recount how many pecks he had got up. He looked flushed, handsome, and very dirty.

'Take care of Mamy till I come back,' said Belle; 'I must consult Miss Dulcey.'

With her letter in one hand and her hat in the other, she rushed out of the house. Miss Dulcey was at home, and Belle told her of the letter and proposal at once.

'I am glad you have had a proposal,'

said Miss Dulcey. 'No woman is happy till she has. Everybody likes to say, "Oh, I might have married if I chose!" It gives one a sort of consequence. I always look on you as an old maid.'

'Why, Miss Dulcey?' asked Belle, slightly hurt.

'The family slavey always is, dear. But I meant no slur either on your attractions or marriageable capabilities. But what are you going to say to Mr. Pearce?'

'I am going to refuse him, but I am afraid of offending him,' replied Belle.

'Your first, perhaps your only offer. A good one too,' mused Miss Dulcey. 'You don't care for him? I am your godmother, so I am permitted to catechise you.'

'No, Miss Dulcey, I don't care for him. I mistrust him.'

'So do I, Belle. But he will be a powerful enemy if the "next-of-kin" fall through.

Moreover, I believe he has made up his mind, because he thinks your father will come into Jabez Dauncey's money. Still there must be no half measures, and you must either accept or refuse him decidedly, come what may. Shilly-shallying is destruction, both in love and war. We should never have lost Gordon but for that. Write your letter here, and let me see it, if you don't mind. Take my place, and you will be inspired, for I once wrote a similar letter to a man who wanted this snug little house and my money, and condescended to take me into the bargain.'

Miss Dulcey placed Belle at her writing-table and left her. Everything was so quiet that Belle fancied she could write her letter easily. But she had never before had so difficult a task. She did not wish to offend Mr. Pearce, but she fancied he was one who brooked no contradiction. He had been a successful man all his life,

and your successful people are more alive to disappointment than those who are accustomed to it. She feared—indeed, she knew—that his gains were not all honestly gotten, as she counted honesty, and this seemed for a moment to make her task more easy. But she could not allude to this. She thanked him, as women do, for his high opinion of her, and for the honour of his proposal; so far she got discreetly but stiffly, and then in a few words she declined it positively.

When Miss Dulcey returned she was meditating how she could allude to her father's affairs, but her godmother bade her 'leave them to imagination, and wind up with polite regret, etc.' She did so, and the letter was consigned to Miss Dulcey's letter-box.

'If we lose the fortune, he has us entirely in his power,' sighed Belle.

'That is not Mr. Burmester's teaching, nor Shakespeare's,' said Miss Dulcey.

'"There's a Power that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will."

No lawyer, however acute, can circumvent that Power, and we have had a curious experience of late of how the Omniscient works. Do your duty, Belle, as you have always done, to the best of your ability, and there will be a break in the clouds.'

'Thank you, dear Miss Dulcey. Thank you for all your kindness all your life,' said Belle. 'If only Charlie is spared to us, all will be easy.'

'If only!' How often we short-sighted mortals seek to qualify God's regulations by an 'If only!'

CHAPTER VII.

ONLY A STATION-MASTER.

Almost to her surprise, Belle received a letter from her father, written the day after he reached Montreal. She had feared lest his procrastinating spirit might cause him to lose the mail. It was short, but, like himself, hopeful. It was as follows:

'Dear Belle,

I arrived here late last night, too late to write. I came at once to Mr. Stint's private residence, and his good wife insisted on my remaining the night.

We can't approach the Canadians in hospitality. I found Charlie better than I expected, though very ill. He said my coming would cure him. God grant it may! Poor fellow, he was terribly overset, as you may suppose, and so was I; but I am pretty sure he will be all right again soon. I have seen people recover who looked much worse, though he is awfully thin and white. My presence here will finish up the business, and, so far as can be seen at present, Jabez Dauncey's fortune is ours. Not a bit of doubt of it: so you may give promissory notes, or borrow from Pearce, or do whatever seems best to get over present liabilities, certain of lots of money to clear off everything before Christmas. That is to say, as soon as the lawyers can wind up the affairs here. They have no doubt as to my identity, but have still a few preliminaries to settle. You have had much anxiety, but it will be over soon. If

only I could be sure about Charlie! But he is so much better than I expected to find him, that I think he will be well enough to return home with me when the "next-of-kin" is quite finished up. Of course I shall not leave Montreal until all is concluded to a fraction. As to money, we can draw on Stint and Co. Charlie is not allowed to speak of business. It is feared that fatigue and over-anxiety brought on the attack. But my opinion is, only here as at home nobody asks for it, that he might just as well talk over the affairs as ramble on continually about the children and poor Amy and all your trouble. One would think that you were the only person in the world who has to work. Tell Weatherley he had better stick to us. Nobody knows how rich we shall be. Don't put down your damper, Miss Belle, for it is as good as settled. Let the squire keep his acres; we don't want 'em.

But Charlie and Mr. Stint both want me, and I must end, with much love to yourself, Flo, and the young fry, from Charlie and myself, and remain,

'Your affectionate father,

'CHARLES DAUNCEY.'

Belle read and pondered over this letter before she communicated its contents to the rest of the family. She knew her father well, and mistrusted what he said about her brother. Still, she was thankful to the Almighty that he was still alive, and that there was hope. This great fortune seemed now so near them that she could no longer banish it from her thoughts; and the prospect of clearing off mortgages and debts, and living without money anxieties was so delightful that, for the moment, she forgot all else, and began to form plans for the future. It was but for a moment, for fears soon dispelled the

hopes. What would money or lands be worth if anything were to happen to Charlie?

Flo and the children were in towering spirits over the letter, and when Dolly joined them at tea, by previous invitation, the house echoed to their merriment. Health and illimitable riches were coming to the Daunceys, and the young folk rejoiced accordingly.

'If Mr. Mute—stupid alliteration—had waited until this were known, he would not have run away in that mean fashion. But I don't care a pin,' said Flo to Belle, when they were alone.

It was clear to Belle that she did care very much indeed, and, although she made some efforts to do her duty by her pupils, they were at best fitful. She grew tired of her monotonous work, and longed for excitement. There was not certainly much amusement at Hollyfield just then.

'We must try to be patient and work on till we know more of the fortune, and are sure that dear Charlie will recover,' said Belle.

'Meanwhile I shall die of *ennui*,' said Flo, throwing up her arms. 'I am not "to the manner born," like you, dear Belle. And now Mr. Burmester asks me to undertake the choir—train it, is the word—and I dare not refuse. Here he is, come to fetch Dolly; I know his knock.'

Mr. Burmester was always a welcome visitor to Belle. She opened the door to him, and received him gladly. He was a grave man, and always in his work, so that Flo rather avoided him when she could. She declared that he had never seen a joke in his life, and she could not put up with anyone blind to a joke. This was not altogether true; but he was wont to say that those who had the care of souls had little time for jesting. Belle at once produced

her father's letter, and the vicar entered heart and soul into it. This was a great comfort to Belle; she had not been able to carry it to Miss Dulcey. He could only re-echo her words, and add the text, 'In patience possess ye your souls.' He was never ashamed of his Master's messages, but quoted from Holy Writ in a way that Flo sometimes called prosaic.

She was rather afraid of him, and, when he began the subject of the choir, made but a feeble resistance; so that, when he and Dolly took leave, Miss Flo found herself with a new responsibility.

Belle awoke the next morning with a lightened heart. She had been dreaming of Charlie restored to health, and of heaps of money, and she supposed that, after all, there might be something in dreams. She set about her work with such cheerful alacrity that Molly was quite in spirits, and as to the children, they caught the

infection, and were so hilarious that you would have supposed the good things hoped for had really come to pass.

During the morning Miss Dulcey appeared. Belle had been up early helping Molly to make the butter. Castle Farm was not a dairy farm, so there was not much to do in that way; still they managed to supply the vicarage and Miss Dulcey, as well as themselves, with milk and butter, and Belle's butter was reputed excellent. Weatherley was also astir betimes, and was so helpful, in a thousand ways, that Molly declared, 'He was a'most as good a man-of-all-work as Ben!' On this particular morning he was engaged in turning the winnowing machine. Flo had started in tolerable time for the vicarage, and had promised to attend the choir practice in the evening, so the farm was unusually quiet when Miss Dulcey arrived. Molly answered the door to her, and they

had not met since the episode of Ben's declaration.

'So, Molly, you have brought Ben to the point at last,' said Miss Dulcey.

'Deet, no, miss. It was Ben as 'ouldn't be letting me alone till I did promise to keep company with him. But I'll never be leaving Miss Belle.'

'I don't understand how you can keep company with both, Molly. Ben is a queer fellow, and, like his sex, thinks of nobody but himself.'

'I did say I would just walk out with Ben, and work for Miss Belle—for the present,' said Molly, with a shrewd look at Miss Dulcey, who laughed, and went in search of Belle.

Mr. Dauncey's letter was soon laid before this true friend, who could but feel hopeful over it. As to the fortune, that seemed sure, she said, and Belle's money difficulties must soon cease.

'Charlie has great rallying power. I think he will recover. I saw my brother yesterday, and he asked if you had heard from your father. Something had annoyed him, and he did not even allude to Weatherley. I am afraid the country gossip has reached him, and he fancies he has been talked about in connection with the children, and that people have said how glad they are that the squire is coming round. Of all things he hates to be commented upon, poor dear soul! As if he was to be exempt from the common lot. Most of us flatter ourselves that nobody can find anything to say about us; but, my patience, I know what it is when one's back is turned. And how dull we should all be if we couldn't discuss the shortcomings and foibles of our neighbours. I should, at least.'

'Dear Miss Dulcey, if we get this great fortune, what shall we do with it?' asked

Belle. 'I would rather not have it, I would indeed. I only just want enough to pay the debts, and buy a profession for Charlie.' Here Belle paused. A sudden cloud seemed to come between her and the light. She had been hopeful when Miss Dulcey came in, and one of the unaccountable fears took possession of her when she spoke of her brother's future.

'We will find enough to do with the money, and Flo will dispense it royally if you will not,' said Miss Dulcey, cheerfully. 'She will have lovers in plenty, and who knows but that you may get another Pearce after all? But I want Mamy. Margaretta is coming to tea, and I wish to surprise her.'

Mamy was having her mid-day sleep, but Belle promised to take her to Miss Dulcey. While they were still talking, a huge double rat-tat sounded on the door knocker.

'It is a telegram!' cried affrighted Belle. 'Mr. Mulready promised to bring it himself if one should arrive.'

She could scarcely move for terror. Her face grew white, her hands trembled. Miss Dulcey, terrified also, went to the door, and Belle followed. Another of the awful knocks resounded as they reached it. Why are telegraph-boys and postmen armed with such nerve-stirring weapons? It was not a telegram, it was only a note after all. Moss, the station-boy, was trying his hand again. But what might not the note contain?

'What do you mean by making such a row, Sam?' asked Miss Dulcey, whom Sam would not have offended for worlds, seeing she was unusually rich in threepennies.

'I always knocks like that, miss. They thinks it's a telegram, and comes quick,' grinned Moss. 'I be to wait for an answer.'

Molly appeared at the moment, and carried Moss off for a gossip, while the ladies returned to the dining-room.

'He has enclosed the telegram,' stammered Belle. 'Open it, Miss Dulcey.'

'It is only a note, dear,' said Miss Dulcey, who saw that Belle could scarcely speak or move.

'Read it,' she said.

Miss Dulcey glanced through the contents, and perceived that they were not alarming.

'It is only a note from Mr. Mulready, dear, who seems to have something particular to say to you, and wants to know if he can have an interview with you this afternoon,' she said, looking at Belle. 'He writes, he says, because he is afraid of missing you.'

The colour returned to Belle's cheeks, but she was still affrighted.

'He has heard something,' she stam-

mered. 'He is so very kind that he wants to tell me himself. He brought over the telegram about poor Charlie.'

'Then why didn't he come instead of sending that oaf, Moss?' asked Miss Dulcey. 'Men are all fools. I did fancy that Mr. Mulready had a few grains of common sense till now.'

'So he has, Miss Dulcey,' exclaimed Belle, roused by this imputation on her friend's wisdom. 'He thinks for everybody, rich and poor.'

'Oh!' almost whistled Miss Dulcey. 'I see! Another admirer, eh, Belle? And I condemned you to spinsterhood! I like him and his flowers, but I hate mysteries. Wherever there's a mystery, there's something wrong. Remember, nobody knows anything about him, and he's only a station-master. A respectable and responsible position, I daresay, but one wouldn't like to live at a station, it is so noisy; indeed,

there is only room for one person at Orchardson.'

'I am sure he is a gentleman!' said Belle; 'but I don't know what you mean, Miss Dulcey.'

'Perhaps you will after the interview. Like Pearce, it strikes me that he is alive to the "next-of-kin." Seriously, Belle, if he comes with what people called "intentions," you must snub him. All your family are well connected, if poor, and by-and-by you may take rank with the best of us. You needn't be offended, but I misdoubt every-one who goes harking after money.'

'I scarcely think you need misdoubt Mr. Mulready,' said Belle, regaining her natural manner, which was dignified if unaffected. 'He and I have many things in common. We love flowers and the country and little children and villagers, and he has been very kind to us. I will tell you to-morrow, dear godmother, all he says to me.'

'Thank you, Belle. There's safety in confidence. I shall expect Mamy at half-past three, or, according to modern parlance, at 3.30.'

Miss Dulcey hopped off like a bird from its twig, leaving Belle in mystified confusion. Certainly, if Mulready had something particular to say he could not have chosen a more auspicious afternoon. Belle was to be alone. No, not quite alone, for Weatherley would be at home. A happy thought came to her. She would send Mamy to the Gables with him, and Miss Dulcey would keep him to tea, understanding as she did the circumstances of the case. It must be confessed that Belle was unusually excited, and that when she gave Mamy her dinner, and subsequently put on her best frock for her visit to Aunt Dulcey, she was thinking more of the interview in prospect than of the child.

'Dolly's best fock, pease, Aunt Belle,'

pleaded Mamy, and the doll, whose injured arm had averted an evil day, had to be arrayed.

Weatherley, being a man of business, chafed at being compelled to smarten himself in order to take Mamy to the Gables, and Belle perceived that her nephew was put out.

'If you would rather not go, Weatherley, I will take Mamy myself,' she said.

'I am quite ready, Aunt Belle. Come along, Mamy,' he replied, and the coast was clear.

And not too soon, for scarcely had the children departed when Mulready arrived. Belle received him in Flo's parlour, into which the sun shone brightly. In the window was a stand full of geraniums and other flowers, grown from cuttings made by Mulready in his station garden.

'Why do I feel so stiff and unnatural? I wish Miss Dulcey hadn't put those ideas

into my head,' thought Belle, as she and Mulready sat down and were silent awhile, as if wondering which ought to speak first.

Mulready began by inquiring for Charlie, and Belle's ice was broken at once. When she had told him of her father's letter, he started upon the subject that had brought him to the farm. Neither of them alluded to the 'next-of-kin,' and Belle was relieved on that point, though sorely troubled by his first piece of news.

'I want to say good-bye to you, Miss Dauncey. I could not leave without doing so,' he said.

'Good-bye! You are not going away!' she ejaculated, with a pain in her voice that, perhaps, pleased him.

'For a time, at least,' he replied. 'I have had leave of absence, and a substitute has been found who will hold my post till I return. You have been so kind to me, and we are, I hope, such good

friends, that I wish you to know something of my history before I leave Orchardson. I come of an unfortunate family who had the gift of spending all they got. You know a little of what that means. My father had a small patrimony in the north of England, and lived as if it were a large one. He had two sons, of whom I was the youngest. My mother died when we were children. We were not brought up to any profession, which must account to you for my present position. We lived at home, and had a tutor until it was discovered that my father was in such a bad state of health, that he must go abroad if his life were to be prolonged. I went with him, and my brother remained at home, ostensibly to take care of the property. He was a sportsman, and what is called "a jolly good fellow," so he was not likely to economise either for himself

or our father. It is impossible to account for the down grade of certain families. But that they do get lower and lower from various causes is undoubted. Ours did. My father was too ill to return to England and my brother failed in his remittances, so we were put to great straits. It was at this time I made acquaintance with Mr. Mute. He was very kind to us, and is, I believe, a thoroughly good fellow, though I cannot understand his conduct the other day.

'We were at Mentone when my poor father died. I had managed to obtain employment on the railway, which enabled me to support him when we could get nothing from my brother. My position was difficult, for I did not like to apply to other friends at home for fear of offending and perhaps humiliating my brother.

'I will not harrow you with a descrip-

tion of my poor father's sufferings and death. I was thankful to be with him, and to do all in my power for him. We met with many kind friends, for it is a kindly world; but none more sympathetic than Mr. Mute. He promised not to lose sight of me; but in the turmoil of this fast age it is almost impossible to keep friends in view for long together. I buried my dear father in beautiful Mentone, and left the sunny south with a sigh. When I came back to England, I found that my brother had not only spent all that he could lay hold of, but had borrowed money in my father's name. This was tantamount to a forgery, and he left the country. He and I were much attached to one another, and parting from him was even worse than receiving my father's last blessing; for the one departed with a blot on his name, the other died penitent and believing.'

Mulready paused. He had spoken rapidly so far, with his eyes downcast. He raised them suddenly and looked at Belle. Hers were full of tears, and he smiled.

'Thank you for your sympathy. I knew I should have it,' he continued. 'I wanted you to learn the secret of such mystery as may have hung over my life here. Our small property was put to the hammer, and bought by my mother's brother, who has always kept aloof from us. All the debts were paid, and I took the first situation that offered, as clerk on a railway. This led, by degrees, to my obtaining my present post, which I like because I am independent. The reason of my leaving it for an indefinite period is that I have had a letter from the uncle who bought the property, summoning me at once to him. He has heard of my brother, and wishes to consult me about him. As he has never

written to me since he bought the estate, I did not know that he had my address; but he must have managed to keep me in sight. He is a queer man, and I believe objected to my mother's marriage with my father, and scarcely noticed her afterwards. He says my brother is in New York, and it may be necessary for me to go to him there.'

'New York!' exclaimed Belle. 'How strange! Perhaps you may see Charlie.'

'I certainly will, if I can. It is a strange coincidence that your brother and mine should both be in America. I pray to be permitted to see mine once again.'

There was a pause, for neither could speak for suppressed emotion.

'You will not forget me?' he said at last. 'I have not many friends, and I always look on you and yours as my truest

—on you particularly. Am I presumptuous?'

'Oh, no; I am so much obliged to you,' replied Belle, quite laughing at the idea of presumption as connected with friendship, and it was delightful to hear her pleasant laugh once more.

He smiled and held out his hand. She put hers frankly into it, and he said he should consider their friendship sealed for all time. Then he took out his watch, that mouthpiece of the old man with the scythe, and added that he had not many minutes left.

'We shall meet again, God willing,' he said, reverently. 'You will not mention my little history? You are the only person to whom I have told it, and I know you believe in me.'

'I do—I do,' cried Belle. 'What shall I do without—without so many of my friends?'

'We shall be together in spirit. We shall pray for one another. God bless and keep you!' said Mulready; and, without waiting for another word, hurried away.

Belle rushed out after him, and overtook him just as he was opening the front door. She seized her hat from its peg in the passage, and walked with him across the paddock and down the hill, talking rapidly.

'If you see father and Charlie, tell them you found everything well with us. Say we don't care for the money, we only want them back. Oh, I hope you will find your brother! What you must have suffered all these years! And if you see Mr. Mute, say that Flo was much hurt at his not coming to see her when he was so near. And, above all, take care of yourself. I am so sorry—so very sorry you are going away.'

'Thank you, dear Miss Dauncey. I shall soon be back again,' said Mulready, pausing to shake hands once more.

And so they parted.

CHAPTER VIII.

PEARCE AGAIN.

Miss Dulcey brought Mamy back herself. Weatherley had excused himself from remaining to tea on plea of work to be done, and Miss Dulcey had told him she would take the child home. Accordingly she encountered Belle not long after her separation from Mulready. In spite of her invectives against the curiosity of her sex, she had a good share of it herself, and wanted to know what the station-master had to say to her god-daughter.

Belle was setting the tea things when she went into the dining-room, and looked so bright and was so smartly dressed, that she emitted one of her long-drawn 'Oh's." But Mamy diverted her attention by running up to Belle with,

'Ook, Aunt Belle. Two illies.'

'Margaretta will spoil that child as she did her mother,' said Miss Dulcey. 'I've had to lug this bedstead, while Mamy carried a doll in each arm. She would on no account relinquish the old one. I like her for that. A broken-down old friend is preferable to a smug new one.'

Miss Dulcey put down a magnificent doll's bedstead, duly curtained and furnished with spring mattress, etc., and Mamy was soon engaged in laying the 'two illies' between the bedclothes.

'Now tell me what brought Mr. Mulready,' said Miss Dulcey.

'He only came to say good-bye. He is

going away on a long holiday, and may not return to Orchardson.'

'Was it the "next-of-kin" that brought him, like Pearce?"

'He did not name the subject.'

'Then what was it? Did he propose? Men are capable of anything, and have no modesty. Nor women either, nowadays, for that much. The men say that the law of proposal is reversed. Perhaps you took the initiative?'

'Oh, Miss Dulcey!' said Belle, offended. 'I assure you Mr. Mulready only came to wish us good-bye.'

'Us? How long have you used the royal plural pronoun? He knew there was only you at home.'

Belle had no reply ready, and Miss Dulcey saw that she could not penetrate her secret if she had one. Indeed, she believed implicitly in Belle, and took it for granted that she spoke the truth, though she had

all sorts of suspicions concerning Mulready. He had doubtless come forward because he knew of the American fortune, and had laid his plans to entrap Belle. Shrewd Miss Dulcey had her suspicions, and resolved to watch over Belle's interests in the absence of her father and brother. Still she liked Mulready, albeit he was only a station-master.

But she forgot him in a proposal she had to make to Belle. Miss Margaretta wished to be allowed to have Mamy for a short time on a visit. The child appeared to return the sudden love of this her great-aunt, and Miss Dulcey saw no reason why she should not go to the Court. Neither did Belle, though she was doubtful as to results.

'Margaretta says she will write to Fanny, and ask her to come back and take charge of her,' said Miss Dulcey. 'Her poor mother's doll's-house, toys, books, and

general possessions remain in her old nursery, ready for a new generation. What a whirligig is time! It goes round and round, and comes back to the same place at last, only with a difference.'

'I don't know what we shall do without Mamy,' sighed Belle.

'What did you do before she came here?' asked Miss Dulcey.

They had forgotten Mamy's presence, who was listening to what they were saying, attracted by her own name.

'Mamy 'ike to see mamma's baby-house,' she said, running up to Belle.

'And so we begin again just where the whirligig started thirty years ago,' said Miss Dulcey.

'Charlie wishes the children to be friends with poor Amy's relations, and she shall be ready when Miss Weatherley appoints,' added Belle, taking her little niece into her arms.

Thus it came to pass that Miss Margaretta had her wish, and, with the squire's consent, came to Castle Farm to fetch Mamy. All the household was at the door to see her off, and, when Belle placed her in the carriage by the side of her great-aunt, she felt as if some sudden wrench had torn away part of life, and that this was the beginning of sorrows. But the novelty of change, the horses, servants, and above all, Miss Margaretta, consoled the other children; though Weatherley magnanimously declared that he would not leave Aunt Belle until his father came back.

'It is only for a visit,' said Marjory, jumping into the carriage to give Mamy a last hug.

'Mamy tome back,' said the child, looking at Belle, who had tears in her eyes, and holding out her arms.

'We are ready. Drive on, Larkins,' said

Miss Margaretta, with a meaning glance at Belle.

'She will soon come back; but I shall be miserable while she is away,' whispered Marjory to Weatherley.

'Hush! don't let Aunt Belle hear you. She can't bear her going, but it is right,' returned Weatherley. 'Father wishes us to be friends with the squire, you know, and I am as much his lawful heir as grandfather is Jabez Dauncey's.'

The house seemed very melancholy without Mamy, and Belle and Molly vied with each other in exclamations of regret as they missed her pattering feet and pretty voice following them wheresoever they went. However, they were consoled when Miss Dulcey brought word the next day that Mamy was at the height of childish joy, surrounded by dolls and toys enough to set up a shop. She had driven to the Court on purpose to inquire.

'My brother is as great a goose as Margaretta,' she said, 'and thinks Mamy an angel. I don't wonder, for she might be her mother over again. Fanny is there, and as happy as a queen with the child. For my part, I like Marjory the best. She is so good and unselfish—like you, Belle. Did you ever think of self?'

'Those we love are part of self, and I am always thinking of them,' replied Belle. 'Oh, Miss Dulcey, if father and Charlie come back, this self will be the happiest self in the whole world. I wish Jabez Dauncey had never turned up to take them away from England. It is the uncertainty that kills. One mail brings hope, the next despair. I have lived years in the last three months, and peace seems to have fled from us altogether.'

Certainly the events that had happened of late seemed to have come in a crowd. Charlie's illness, Mr. Dauncey's departure,

Mr. Mute's visit to Orchardson, Pearce's proposal, Mulready's leave-taking, Mamy's invitation to the Court, succeeded one another with bewildering rapidity, and Belle felt as though her life had been suddenly changed.

She awaited the next mail with great anxiety. Although she kept her fears to herself, she dreaded the worst for Charlie. Her thoughts by day and her dreams by night were of him. Weatherley was her principal comfort and confidant, and they watched for the letter, half in hope, half in fear. It came, and its contents were startling indeed, as unexpected as extraordinary. It ran as follows :

'Dearest Belle,

'It is all upset. I am not the next-of-kin after all. The son and heir has turned up. There is no doubt about him. Messrs. Stint know him well, and so

does everybody else. He arrived last night. I have not seen him. I am done for. I have ruined you all. You were right, and I had better have stopped at home. I am afraid I shall go out of my mind, for what with the disappointment and Charlie's health, and my own pig-headedness, my brains are in a whirl, and I scarcely know where I am. We shall come home at once; that is to say, as soon as it is safe for Charlie. I think he is better; he looks almost well sometimes, and the doctors seem hopeful. He says you are to let the squire do as he likes with the children, for he doesn't know what may happen to him. He gets depressed sometimes, and this new event has floored him. No wonder, poor fellow! but it is all my fault. Everything is, and always has been. I made sure of the fortune, and was sure, until yesterday, when this young scapegrace came back.

We shall go to the Union, for everything is virtually Pearce's. He may foreclose to-morrow; probably will when he hears that we have lost our game. He may turn us out of doors—out of doors, I say. Oh, Belle! what is to become of us? I have spent all my money, and must work my passage home. But Charlie is not strong enough for that. Pearce has supplied me on the strength of the next-of-kin. And, after all, I am not the next-of-kin. That is not my fault, only part of my ill-luck. Charlie wants to add a post-script, so I will end.

'Your unfortunate

'FATHER.

'P.S.—My dear ones. The dream of riches is over. It is God's will. We are in His hands, and, if it please Him to take me to Himself and to Amy, you must not rebel. He has given me peace and pre-

pared me. I hear that the real heir is a good fellow, and hope to see him to-morrow, and to lay our condition before him. Father is cast down by the sudden reverse, but adversity and prosperity are equally from the Lord. May God bless my darling children. I give them into your care to do what is best for them. I strive for resignation to the Divine will. Pray for it also, my best of sisters. You have been everything to us all. Let the squire provide for the children if he will. I know he will do what is right by them. My dear love to you all. Kiss Mamy and Marjory, and Weatherley for their tender father. God bless you all for ever and ever. His peace passeth understanding.

'CHARLIE.'

For a long time neither word nor sound succeeded the reading of this letter. Belle covered her face with her hands, and

Weatherley put his arms around her. The boy spoke first.

'Aunt Belle, do you think father will live to come back? He must not—he cannot die out there.'

'Our Heavenly Father knows best,' said Belle, and a sob broke from her.

'Oh, Aunt Belle, we love him so! We have prayed for him so much. The good God will not take him away from us so far, far away!'

'Dear boy, life and death are in His hands.'

Belle could say no more. The brave spirit gave way, and she burst into tears. Weatherley wept with her, and it was as if they could not be comforted. They gave no thought to the fortune; they only felt intuitively that those words, written in a half-illegible hand, might be the last the dearly-loved father and brother might ever write. But youth is hopeful, and

Weatherley roused himself to give courage to Belle.

'Grandfather thinks him better. Perhaps next mail may bring another letter. Perhaps he may come home,' he said, suppressing his own grief.

'We will hope and pray for it; may God have mercy upon us!' said Belle, folding the boy in her arms.

When Flo and Marjory returned from the vicarage, they were told only of the loss of the fortune, and that Charlie was no better. Belle would not depress them by her forebodings, though they, Flo especially, were sufficiently cast down by the collapse of all their hopes of prosperity. She inveighed against the innocent heir for appearing just as the 'next-of-kin' was settled in her father's favour, against the lawyers, the advertisements, and everything that had to do with raising their hopes of untold wealth, only to dash them

to pieces again. But, when she saw how that Belle's spirits were quite gone, she strove to comfort her; and, with her characteristic versatility, declared she 'didn't care a pin for all the money in the world.'

Marjory was more clear-sighted, and was sure, from Weatherley's manner, that something was amiss with her father. She said so, and then the boy broke down again, and the truth came out.

'Perhaps he is already dead!' sobbed Weatherley.

'Nonsense!' cried Flo; 'perhaps he is much better. The one is as likely as the other. "While there's life there's hope," and I haven't the least doubt of his returning quite well.'

Her hopefulness communicated itself to the children, and before the day was done some amount of cheerfulness reigned at the farm. Belle strove to believe that those last words of the letter were merely

the symptoms of nervous depression, and not of approaching death. It was strange that the fact of the loss of those coveted millions should be overpowed by the possibility of the death of one frail human being, and there was no one in Hollyfield who would not willingly have relinquished the money to save Charlie's life. What if both were to be lost?

The news soon spread, as ill news does, through the village and neighbourhood. Molly told Ben that very evening; Ben told his mistress; Miss Dulcey communicated it to the Burmesters, and it was speedily known that 'poor Mr. Dauncey was done out of the big American fortune, that Mr. Charles was very ill, and that they were worse off than they were before.'

There were many sympathisers, though, as is usually the case on such occasions. Half of them said to one another,

'I knew how it would be. Those ad-

vertisements always come to nothing. Dauncey was a fool to run after anything belonging to that Jabez; and as to poor Charlie—but then he was always weak.'

They were wise after the event, and so was Miss Dulcey, who came to the farm the next day in great excitement. She found Belle at the old bureau, answering the fatal letter. She began upon it at once.

'It was as much my fault as your father's. If I had not lent the money, Charlie could not have gone. Of course the son is the rightful heir; but why didn't he turn up before? The world gets more and more aggravating every day, and the faster it goes the worse it is. I believe it is all due to the advertising system.'

'Oh, Miss Dulcey!' suddenly interrupted Belle. 'I am sure that is Mr. Pearce. Don't leave me alone with him.'

She had seen some one on horseback ride

across the paddock, and her fears were soon verified. Mr. Pearce came in. She had not seen him since her letter to him refusing his proposal, and she knew not how he would meet her. She soon perceived how grievously she had offended him. He bowed with polite frigidity, touched her fingers, and, with a slight movement to Miss Dulcey, seated himself opposite them and the bureau. Belle turned very pale, and Miss Dulcey very red. The latter was combative, and liked to encounter an enemy; and such she felt assured was the lawyer.

'I am sorry to be the bringer of bad news, Miss Dauncey,' he said, coldly. 'But I thought it better to come than write. Jabez Dauncey's son——'

'We know all about it,' interrupted Miss Dulcey. 'Belle had a letter from her father yesterday. It is a sad grievance; but, as it cannot be helped, it must be

borne. People always turn up when they are not wanted. I suppose you heard from Stint and Co.?'

'Yes. They tell me the young man had a quarrel with his father and left him some years ago. The advertisement met his eye, and he returned to claim the fortune.'

'Just like men. The golden bait hooks them when they manage to evade the iron one, duty. Did they mention Charlie?'

'I am sorry to say they did. He is very ill.'

Belle was about to ask a question, but Miss Dulcey prevented her by an inquiry as to how and when the absentees could return.

'That depends on the two necessities, health and money,' replied Pearce, drily. 'I came to speak to Miss Dauncey about the latter. Perhaps——' He paused, and glanced at Belle.

'You would prefer a private interview.

Very natural, Mr. Pearce; but there are no secrets between Belle and me. I am her godmother, you know, and insist upon her confiding in me.'

'Is there any fresh difficulty?' asked Belle, who had not spoken before.

'Scarcely fresh, Miss Dauncey. The fact is, that I have exhausted my resources in providing for your father, and shall be obliged to foreclose and get back the principal if I am to keep going myself.'

Miss Dulcey saw the meaning glance that accompanied this threat, if Belle did not. Indeed, Belle seemed almost too abstracted to understand it.

'You must wait for Mr. Dauncey's return to settle that,' said Miss Dulcey, brusquely. 'I suppose my brother, as landlord, has the first claim.'

'We only owe him half a year's rent, and he has kindly promised to wait,' said

Belle, who sat like a lay figure, motionless and breathless.

'He wouldn't harm a mouse, much less a neighbour. It is you lawyers who "lade men with heavy burdens." May I ask the weight of the one you have put upon Mr. Dauncey's shoulders?' said Miss Dulcey.

'It is so light that Miss Dauncey may lift it off if she choose,' returned Pearce, meaningly.

'But if she does not choose? In less metaphorical language, what does her father owe you? You must excuse my interference, but, as matters stand, I am the only friend at hand who can help her in this painful strait.'

'I believe I may say that everything Mr. Dauncey possesses is mine, and, were his property and personalities sold to-morrow, they would not realise enough to defray my claim. I looked to this Ameri-

can fortune as you did, Miss Weatherley, as a certain settlement of all difficulties, which it would have been, but for this unlucky termination of our hopes.'

I daresay the young Jabez considers it lucky. Right is right,' said Miss Dulcey. 'But you will scarcely sell up poor Mr. Dauncey till he comes back. It wouldn't be according to law. Maybe, he had better remain in Canada. I don't quite understand your game, Mr. Pearce. What is it?'

'I really have none. I want money, and must have it. Miss Dauncey understands her father's affairs as well or better than he does himself, and I rode over to tell her so. Forewarned is forearmed, and I think she will acknowledge that I have shown some patience with her father—for —her sake. Good morning!'

Mr. Pearce rose, made a formal bow to the ladies, and seemed about to withdraw.

But, when he looked at Belle's white face, he hesitated a moment. She half rose, then sat down again.

'Have pity on my poor father and dying brother,' she said, clasping her hands.

'The power is yours. You decline to use it. You have only to change your mind.'

'That she will never do,' put in Miss Dulcey, laying her hand on Belle's, and placing her small figure between her and the lawyer. 'Do your worst, Mr. Pearce, and we will all do our best, God helping us. Good-morning.'

Mr. Pearce took his leave, and Miss Dulcey made a great show of ringing the bell, a ceremony not customary at the farm.

'Oh, Miss Dulcey, what is to become of us?' cried Belle.

'We can only wait. I will speak to my brother, and see if anything can be done

to avert the climax. Pearce is in earnest, and cannot be expected to wait for ever, either for love or money. But perhaps the best thing that could happen would be to clear off everything and begin afresh. Why, child, bankrupts are said to like the excitement, and to cheat their creditors for the fun of it. Cheer up. If you give way, all is done for.'

Belle strove against herself, and roused up. No undertaking more difficult; yet it is practicable. She and Miss Dulcey tried to look the very worst in the face; but the very worst was Charlie. And oh, the miserable days that followed! Belle's dread was lest a telegram should come; and now there was no one at Orchardson who would bring it, if it did arrive, and break the news to her. The cloud over Castle Farm hung heavier than ever, and the place looked gloomier and more dilapidated. Even Molly ceased to

sing Welsh songs and hymns as she clattered about, and the silence seemed portentous. The expected and dreaded letter came at last. Flo and Marjory were at home, for Dolly and her father had a holiday, and were gone elsewhere; so Marjory watched with Weatherley for the postman. They came running through the green, each with a letter. Weatherley gave his to Belle, Marjory hers to Flo. The one was directed by Mr. Dauncey, the other by a stranger, and both were from Montreal. With an effort at composure, Belle opened her father's letter. It contained but a few lines, and announced to the devoted daughter and sister that her darling brother Charlie was dead!

CHAPTER IX.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

'My darlings, God has taken your dear father to heaven. He is with your mother,' were Belle's first words when she had read her brief letter.

Her first thought was for the orphaned children, not for herself. They put their arms about her, they uttered sad, sharp cries of grief, they could not believe that their father was dead. Flo laid down the letter she had opened, and knelt beside them. It was indeed a pathetic group, and a heart-rending moment. Never had

father or brother been more beloved than Charlie, and he was gone. But for the all-sustaining power of the unseen but merciful God, those who mourned him must have lost all hope and strength. So far away! So far away! How often has this sad cry been uttered.

'Aunt Belle, he cannot be dead! We must see him again to say good-bye,' sobbed Marjory.

'He is alive in heaven, with mother,' said Weatherley.

But Flo's grief was the most uncontrollable, and Belle so far mastered her own as to strive to console her.

'Everything at once! All at once!' was her cry.

'Think of poor father,' said Belle. 'We are younger and stronger than he, but he has had all to bear.'

This thought stayed Flo's and the children's sobs, and after a time they

grew calmer. But it is difficult to realise the death of one who left us in health, and whom we can never see again.

'What is that other letter?' asked Belle, seeing a sheet upon the floor. 'Perhaps it will tell us more than poor father's. May our dear Lord pity him.'

Her tears flowed afresh, so that when Weatherley picked up the letter and gave it her she could scarcely see the writing.

'It is directed to me,' said Flo. 'It begins, "My dear cousin." It seems like a horrible jest, for we have no one in the world but ourselves. And we—we—are ruined. I wish I were dead.'

'That is wrong, Aunt Flo,' said the little moralist, Marjory. 'What should we all do without you, now father——' She could say no more for tears.

'This is a letter from Jabez Dauncey's son, and is very kind,' said Belle. 'He will be good to father. Thank God!

Father is not quite alone in that strange land.'

She tried to read the letter, but could not for the choking in her throat, but Flo took it, and got through it somehow. Their attention was soon caught by it, for it gave them particulars which otherwise they would not have learnt. After the "My dear cousin," it was clear enough.

'As your poor father is writing to your sister, I have undertaken to supplement his sad intelligence by telling you what he cannot have the heart to say. I was with your brother for the best part of a week, and with him and your father when he passed peacefully away. Our relationship gave me a sort of right, but I learnt to love him in that short time. He had everything he wanted. I think his last word was "Amy," but before that he said, "I am happy in Jesus Christ." Believe that he "sleeps

well," and that all you desire shall be carried out. I have selected a bright spot for his rest. I seem to know you all from his description. Your poor father is much cast down. I will do my best to cheer him, and will take care that when he is able to return home a good berth in a good ship shall be secured for him. May I beg to be remembered to your sister and the children, and ask you to think kindly of me, and believe me to be, with sincere sympathy, your affectionate if unknown cousin,

'ARTHUR DAUNCEY.'

Perhaps this letter did more to distract the minds of its readers from their grief than anything else could have done. This was the heir who had supplanted them in the inheritance that might have been theirs but for him, and he wrote almost like a friend. Belle was comforted con-

cerning her father, and felt that from the tone of the letter the writer would not allow him to 'work his passage home,' as he had expressed it. It was a gleam of sunshine in the midst of the gloom that oppressed them.

We must pass over the melancholy days that succeeded the sad news as briefly as we may. It is needless to say that friends gathered round the bereaved sisters and fatherless children, and showed such sympathy as might have been expected from those who, dwelling in a narrow sphere, felt every tie that snapped as a personal loss. As to Miss Dulcey and the Burmesters, they overflowed with tenderness, and Dolly was the best of consolers for her young friends. But poor Belle was desolate indeed.

There was no money even to purchase the necessary mourning, and she knew not how soon Mr. Pearce would put his threat

into execution. She believed that he would do it sooner or later, but that he must at least await her father's return. All the farm servants and Molly seemed inspired with twofold vigour by the family afflictions, and the neighbours vied with one another to do what they could. The squire bade Miss Dulcey tell Belle that she was not to be anxious about the rent or the children, for he would condone the rent, and considered the children his special care from this time forth.

Scarcely three months had passed since Mr. Dauncey left home, and Christmas came round—the season towards which the children were looking with delight. Perhaps sorrow seems harder to bear at Christmas than at any other time, and Flo said so to her friend Mrs. Burmester; but that pious and patient lady convinced her that it ought to be the time of all others to lighten grief, since hope of reunion with

the departed dawned on a sinful world with the birth of that Saviour whose advent was specially remembered.

Indeed, the joyous Christmas service, the decorations, the dinner to the aged poor, and the presents tended to cheer the children, and Belle forced herself for their sakes to join in the usual round of Christmas thanksgivings. But all Hollyfield mourned at sight of the pew that contained the bereaved friends of their favourite Charlie. The very holly, somebody said, seemed to weep for him who had loved it and Christmas so well, as a cheery lad. Many were the signs of respectful sympathy, and bits of black appeared here and there, where colour would otherwise have been. Mr. Burmester preached a sermon full of hope and faith, which comforted the sisters more than they could have believed. Even Flo made good re-

solutions to forget self, and live more for eternal things.

After the service, Weatherley disappeared for a short space. He went to speak to his grandfather, and to ask for Mamy. She had remained at the Court by general consent, and Miss Margaretta had stopped at home with her.

'I am very sorry for you, my boy,' said the squire. 'Tell your Aunt Belle that I should have come to see you, but I thought it best to await her father's return. Then we can settle about your future. Mamy is so like your mother, that we seem to have her back again. Only a Christmas-box,' he added, pressing something into his grandson's hand.

It was a small purse, containing five sovereigns. Meanwhile, Miss Dulcey and Dolly joined the others, and walked with them to the farm. They passed Belle's bower, now looking dreary in its winter

vestments. Belle lingered behind. She remembered how she had watched there for Charlie when he last came to see them. It was summer then, and now it was winter indeed, both in nature and her own heart.

Charlie must have been nearly six months away; he had been dead three weeks or more. She seemed to see him coming up the hill, and to live again the moments of her rapid run down the slope to join him. And they would never meet again in this world! Miss Dulcey and Flo had walked on, and Marjory and Dolly had followed. They were out of sight, and Belle sat down in her neglected bower to shed a few slow tears unnoticed. It was almost the first moment of solitude she had spent since the fatal letter. She tried to realise her position.

'His dear children will be provided for,' she thought, as she strained her eyes towards that spot where she had met Char-

lie. 'If the worst come to the worst, Flo and I must work for father. The squire holds the farm, and will not turn us out.'

A figure came toiling up the hill, leaning on a staff. A tall, bent figure. It stood a moment where she met Charlie.

'It is father!' she cried; and, swifter even than when she ran to meet her brother, she hurried down the slope, cleared the fence and gate, and stood by the side of the tall, bent figure. 'Father! father!' she exclaimed, throwing her arms round the wearied man. 'Thank God! oh, thank God!'

'Belle, is it you? Come to meet me. How kind!'

But for Belle's supporting arms, the father so ardently welcomed would have fallen. At the moment the squire and Weatherley came down the hill.

'Make haste! help me—he will fall!' cried Belle.

Weatherley was at her side immediately, the squire almost as soon.

'I am only—tired,' stammered Mr. Dauncey, straightening himself. 'There was no fly at the station. The voyage, and—and—other matters—have been too much for me. Squire, you shall have the boy: Charlie wished it.'

'We will settle that another time: take my arm,' returned the squire, and Mr. Dauncey staggered homewards, supported by his supposed adversary and Belle.

He was faint from exhaustion, but recovered himself with an effort as they reached the house.

'You will come in?' he said, to the squire.

'Of course,' was the reply.

The door was open, and they went into the dining-room, and placed him in his chair. Flo, Miss Dulcey, the children, and Molly soon appeared. He revived at sight

of his darling Flo, and she was soon in his arms, giving way to an ecstasy of pleasure and pain commingled.

'Kiss me, grandfather,' said Marjory.

'Where is Mamy?' he asked.

'She is staying with—my sister, Margaretta,' replied the squire, hesitating.

'In short, we are all friends, Mr. Dauncey,' broke in Miss Dulcey. 'Friendship passes for time any day, so let us shake hands.'

'I think we had better leave them,' whispered the squire to his sister, seeing Dauncey look bewildered.

But Dauncey held out his hand as if in obedience to Miss Dulcey's order, and the squire took it. They had not shaken hands since the marriage of their children, and now it was a mute token of reconciliation. They had been friends in youth, despite differing circumstances.

'Do not leave me: I have much to say,' pleaded Dauncey.

'I will have luncheon with Dulcey and come back,' said the squire.

And he and his sister left the house, followed by Dolly, who whispered to Marjory that she and Weatherley were to spend the afternoon with her.

They left an excited group behind them. It was evident that Mr. Dauncey was exhausted, and Molly went to hasten dinner with a muttered: 'He is looking bad! ten years older than when he went away,'—an opinion endorsed by the others. Indeed, he appeared to be a broken-down old man. Failure and disappointment had done their work, and the death of his son had completed it. However, he revived under the loving care of his children, and, when Molly placed the roast beef on the table, was ready to partake of it. He went mechanically to the head of the table, and began

to carve feebly, as if in a sort of dream. The others took their places also, none liking to interfere or recall him to the present. Flo sat at his right hand, and said cheerfully that it was delightful to see him at his post again.

'Nobody carves like you; not even Belle,' she remarked, helping to hold up the dish as he ladled out the gravy. 'Now you yourself must eat; for you must be hungry after your long walk.'

'And this is Christmas Day!' he muttered. 'A melancholy Christmas. Poor children! Poor children!'

He said no more during dinner, but was apparently absorbed in the meal. Belle was thankful that he ate with appetite, and roused herself to talk to the children to divert their attention from him.

'You must be ready by three o'clock; the poor are punctual,' she said, with an effort at a smile.

'We would rather not go, Aunt Belle,' they both replied.

'You must not disappoint Dolly, and you are to be helpers with her. Besides, you must represent me,' said Belle, with an involuntary sigh.

This was the first of a long string of Christmases that would see her absent from the dinner given to the aged poor in the vicarage kitchen at three o'clock.

When Molly brought in the plum-pudding and mince-pies, Mr. Dauncey looked up absently He removed the spray of holly from the pudding, and murmured, 'Poor Charlie!' then carefully sliced the pudding. When all were helped, he rose and walked up and down the room, as was his old custom. This was a relief to Belle; and when Flo took his arm, and walked with him, it seemed as if there were hope for the future. All the regrets for the dead Charlie were suddenly merged

into anxiety for the living and grief-stricken father.

At a word from Belle, the children went to get ready. It was Mr. Burmester who had decided that it was best for them to resume at once their daily duties, and to assist in keeping Christmas.

While Mr. Dauncey and Flo were still pacing the room, the squire and Miss Dulcey arrived, and were shown into Flo's parlour.

'I cannot see him, Flo,' said the father.

'But you must,' returned the daughter, playfully, urging him out of one apartment into the other, where Belle had preceded them.

'Let me wish you a happy Christmas,' said Miss Dulcey, rising to meet them. 'It is the fashion now to change the good old word "merry" into "happy," but I suppose it's all the same. At any rate we are *happily* met.'

'I hope so. I have so much to say that I had better begin at once. No, thank you; I can always talk best standing or walking,' said Dauncey, as many chairs were offered to him.

'What they call a peripatetic philosopher,' put in the squire, who was examining Flo's parlour curiously. He was seated by the fire, the ladies near him, for the room was not large. All were in mourning. Mr. Dauncey stood, leaning on the mantelpiece. He had collected his thoughts almost miraculously, and began the history of his Canadian visit without circumlocution.

'First of all, I must ask your forgiveness for poor Charlie and myself for having wronged you,' he said, addressing the squire. 'He craved it, and I was to blame for my obstinacy.'

'We were all to blame. Let us forget the past. I have lost a daughter, you a

son. Their children are our inheritance,' said the squire. 'The boy has conquered my enmity. Amy returns in the little one.'

'Thank you, squire. You all know most of what I have to tell. When I reached Montreal, I found Charlie so much better that I did not suspect real danger. I went heart and soul into the next-of-kin. I was the acknowledged heir. The lawyers had no doubt, and were politeness itself. But Charlie got worse, and the doctors—we had the best in the place—were no longer sanguine. All his cry was, "Let Mr. Weatherley have the children." I promised everything he wished, and he was quite happy. He would have liked to have seen them and his sisters again, but his soul seemed with his wife. He talked more of her than of the living, and his cry always was, "Tell the squire she had everything she wanted." He was at

peace with all the world. I never saw him so happy. He forgot the great fortune, and, when I reminded him of it, he only said, "We have been too anxious, father, for the things of this life. We cannot take them away with us." But I remembered our poverty at home and all my liabilities, and did not believe he would die.

'When the real heir, Arthur Dauncey, returned, I thought I should go out of my mind. The senior partner broke the news to me, and I am afraid I insulted him by calling him a liar. I didn't know what I said. But it was too true, and I had to face the real next-of-kin. I met him as an enemy; he met me as a friend and relative. He said he was truly sorry to disappoint me, and scarcely thought he would have claimed a fortune he had almost given up, had he known how I

was situated. He was so frank that I believed him in spite of myself.

'He is one of the best fellows I ever saw. He took to nursing Charlie and trying to comfort me at once. He was with us day and night. We had moved from Mr. Stint's private house to a lodging not far off, and Arthur paid for everything. When I made pretence at borrowing, he said we would settle it when Charlie was better. If I remonstrated, he shut me up by declaring he was only paying his father's debts. I was too cast down to argue or inquire, and scarcely knew what he meant.

'He was with us when Charlie passed away; he saw to everything for me: he said I must look upon him as a son, and trust to him to arrange all the sad ceremony of the funeral. I let him do it thankfully, without inquiring his history,

or the cause of his separation from his father. He and I and the two kind lawyers followed Charlie to the grave, in a beautiful spot in the cemetery at Montreal. He has ordered a marble cross to mark it, and I—I shall never see it more.

'When all was over, I wanted to return home at once. He took me to a sumptuous hotel, while he made arrangements for me. He was as tender and kind as Charlie could have been. He inquired about the children, and about Belle and Flo, and the places where his father used to be. He said he would come and see us as soon as his affairs were in order; he even offered to accompany me if I would remain a few weeks. But I was too restless to stay. I was, indeed, very ill, and he saw it.

'He went with me to New York; took my passage in a fine P. and O. steamer

and paid for it; insisted on my borrowing, as he called it, money enough to bring me safely home from Liverpool, and supplied my every need. He even bought presents for the children, and bade me tell them he hoped to bring them more before next year was very old. They are at the station with my luggage. Where is Mulready? I missed his kind, honest welcome and assistance.'

This sudden question diverted the thoughts of the listeners from the painful subject of poor Charlie's death. It was addressed to Belle, and she explained as well as she could that Mulready was absent for a holiday. Hers were not the only tears, for even the squire's eyes were moist. As to Flo and Miss Dulcey, they could scarcely restrain their emotion. Becoming suddenly sensible of this, Mr. Dauncey looked from one to the other with a sort of dazed questioning; then sat

down by Belle and covered his face with his hands.

'That is over,' said Miss Dulcey, getting up and laying her hand on Dauncey's shoulder. 'Nobody cares for a twice-told tale, so we will begin a new leaf. Who knows what the next-of-kin may yet do for us? Let us prepare the fatted calf against he comes; and, meanwhile, Flo will give us some tea. I know she is fashionable and goes in for all the novelties, Americanisms inclusive. In the good old days it was cake and wine, now it is afternoon tea—a cheap and often a nasty exchange.'

Flo glanced at the squire, who was thankful for any diversion, and who said, with his somewhat stiff manner, as if in reply to a question,

'Yes, if you please. I should like it.'

Belle left the room. Flo drew forth a half-concealed tea-table, and laid on it a

cloth, richly embroidered by her own deft fingers; while their father's face brightened, and he began to realise that he had not lost quite everything he possessed with the fortune and Charlie. Belle soon returned, bearing the tea-tray, and she and Flo between them brought in dainty plates of old-fashioned china full of brown and white bread and butter, cut thin as thin could be.

'Molly is at the vicarage,' apologised Flo, with a graceful bend of the head towards the squire, that became her, at which Miss Dulcey laughed.

By degrees the tears dried, and smiles took their place. Such is life—a chequered path of lights and shadows. Even Mr. Dauncey was cheered by the amazing fact that Squire Weatherley was actually sitting opposite to him, tea-cup in hand and kindly feeling at heart. Belle poured out the tea, Flo waited, and Miss Dulcey hopped

from one to another like a happy robin-redbreast; while Rover sat demure at Belle's right hand. No one forgot Charlie, but all felt that life must go on even though the nearest and dearest had left the brief earthly for the eternal life. They felt it still more when the children came in, brightened by the little parts they had been playing. Their astonished exclamation of 'The squire! I am so glad!' pleased all parties; and, when he greeted them with evident affection, Miss Dulcey said,

'It is a happy Christmas after all.'

CHAPTER X.

AN INVITATION.

It had been what is called 'a green Christmas,' with little frost and no snow. When the family party gathered round the dining-room fire after their early supper, Mr. Dauncey complained that everything was changed, even the weather. He wished it would freeze or blow a hurricane, or do something to remind them that Christmas was there.

'Shall we sing a carol, grandfather?' asked Marjory; and he assented. 'Will

you begin; Aunt Flo?' she added, and Flo started the well-known 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night,' in which Belle and the children joined.

The Christmas bells were pealing gladly from the old church tower, and for a few minutes Mr. Dauncey appeared to forget his griefs. It was only for a few minutes. He was soon pacing the room restlessly, and the 'glad tidings' proclaimed by the carol were apparently unheeded. Not quite, however.

'Charlie used to sing that as a boy,' he said, halting behind his grandson's chair. 'Do you remember, Belle, how you used to come with him to our door at daybreak and awaken us with that very carol?'

'Yes, dear father. And now Charlie realises the meaning of the announcement,' replied Belle.

'Please to tell us exactly what he said,

dear grandfather. We only know what you put in the letters, and what Cousin Arthur wrote to Aunt Flo,' said Marjory.

She took him by the hand and led him back to his chair, then sat down on the rug at his feet. She fixed her appealing eyes on him, and clasped his knee as if she would not let him go. Weatherley, also, rose and stood at the back of his chair, saying that they wanted to be told every word that their much-loved father had said. This roused Mr. Dauncey, and Flo, anxious to prevent an undue return of grief, added that they also wanted to learn something more of the new 'Cousin Arthur,' who had been so kind. She asked why he had written to her in preference to Belle.

'He said, because I was writing to Belle; but I did not inquire or make any comment,' replied her father.

Then he racked his memory to recall

every word Charlie had said. He told the children of his anxiety about their spiritual as well as temporal future; of his wish that they should cling to one another; that they should do their duty; that they should never forget him or their mother.

'We never could, grandfather, we love them dearly,' put in Marjory. 'And we will teach Mamy to remember them by telling her how good they were.'

'They are together now, and very happy,' said Weatherley.

Mr. Dauncey was fairly roused by these innocent comments, and became aware that these children of his dead son were fast growing up, and that their future condition was a grave anxiety.

'Shall you like to live with the squire, children?' he asked, as if by sudden impulse. 'It must be settled this week.'

'I do not wish to leave you, grandfather, but he is very kind, and can afford to give

me an education and a profession. Besides, father wished it,' returned Weatherley, with unnatural thoughtfulness.

'So be it. You are already a man, my boy. I said so when I saw you first with that cane.'

'I mean to remain with you and Aunt Belle. We have quite settled it,' said Marjory. 'Mamy had better stay with Miss Margaretta, now she is there, and Weatherley will go to college, and I shall learn to be a good housekeeper. I think I like making pies and puddings and butter and cheese better than passing examinations. It is only cramming, after all. May I stay with Aunt Belle?'

'We shall see, deary, we shall see,' replied Dauncey, to whose mind came a vision of Pearce, and probable ruin. This stayed his momentary amusement at Marjory.

He had not heard of the lawyer's pro-

posal and threats to Belle; but he knew that, with the loss of the American fortune, all he possessed was his, if he chose to distrain or foreclose.

'What is this Mr. Arthur Dauncey like, father? He is free and easy, if nothing else, for he began his letter "My dear cousin,"' asked Flo.

'He took a great fancy to your photo,' answered Mr. Dauncey, with a spark of his natural humour. 'Poor Charlie had his book of family photographs with him, and showed them to him. He said afterwards —poor Charlie did—that he fell in love with yours at first sight, and asked for it. Charlie gave him the book as a remembrance, so he can now study us all.'

'I daresay he will come and marry Aunt Flo,' said the reflective Marjory.

'That would be jolly. And she would share the big fortune, after all,' added Weatherley.

'I wouldn't marry a Yankee if he owned all the United States, and were president,' exclaimed Flo, the suggestion waking up her slumbering love of admiration and flirtation.

The change of subject changed the flow of ideas, and by degrees the little party became more cheerful. Few of us can be miserable for ever, and Mr. Dauncey and Flo were naturally elastic, and, if cast down to the depths one hour, rebounded the next.

Soon after this little talk they had family prayers. Mr. Dauncey asked Belle to read them and the chapter that preceded them; he was afraid of breaking down. Molly lingered after she rose from her knees to deliver a message—it was from the men who worked on the farm. Mr. Dauncey had been always in the habit of paying his labourers their day's wage on Christmas Day and Good Friday, with the proviso

that they were to go once to church. He kept the days holy himself, he said, and wished his people to do the same; but they and their families must live, therefore he did not subtract a sixth part of their pay. They should be holy days to them in every sense.

'Master,' began Molly, 'all the mens is saying that I am to be thanking you and Miss Belle for Christmas Day. They have been to church, but they do grieve dreadful for Mr. Charlie, and do hope that you will keep up, and that they will be seeing you to-morrow.'

'I hope so, Molly, I hope so; good-night!' stammered Mr. Dauncey. 'I have done one good thing, at least, in my faulty life, even if I borrowed the money to teach them to be religious.' With this grim jest he went to bed.

Contrary to Belle's fears, they had a few quiet days, undisturbed either by Pearce

or any other money-claimant. One morning she told her father of the proposal and refusal as delicately as she could, but he did not see the matter with her eyes. On the contrary, he was annoyed and almost angry. He could not see why she should have ruined them all. He had always looked on her as sensible beyond most women, and now, just as ruin was staring them in the face, and he had gone through the greatest trial of his life, she had aggravated his creditor into becoming his enemy.

'I could not marry a man I despised,' was all that Belle could say.

'Why should you despise him? He is a gentleman, good-looking, and blessed with ample means,' said her father.

'I should be always thinking how he got those means. I should remember the heavy interest he heaped upon the money he lent you, and the poor clients he has ruined because they could not pay. Oh,

father! I am sorry you can wish me to marry him, even to free you from his clutches. I would rather starve with you here, or work for you anywhere else, than soil my conscience by a lie. Mother and you always taught us to speak and act the truth.'

'Don't be violent, Belle. I don't want you to sacrifice yourself for me. Of course he will foreclose, and we shall lose all he can lay his hand upon. I am daily expecting the notice, and wonder he hasn't either been to see me or written. I mean to throw everything up. Sell stock and crops and furniture, and whatever will fetch a penny. I shall get a hole somewhere; Flo and you must go out to service, and the children to the Court. I have quite made up my mind.'

'I am afraid if you did this, father, Mr. Pearce would get the proceeds. Whereas, if you stay on here, the squire has the

first claim. We can sell sufficient farm produce to pay him, and he will not proceed to extremities. I never knew how kind he was until this fresh trouble. He is really sorry for you now.'

'Yes, Belle. I have been a wretched dreamer all my life. Your poor mother did her best to restrain my fancies and to keep me from speculating and borrowing; you have done the same; and now I am an old man, and not a whit improved. If I had taken your advice, and not sent Charlie after that next-of-kin business, he might have been here with us at this moment.'

'Oh, father! Life and death are in God's hands. But for that advertisement, the children would not have come to stay with us, and Mr. Weatherley would not have been reconciled to us through them. He might never have seen them. Now he will provide for them, and all anxiety on

their account will be removed. Both their mother and Charlie prayed for this, and their prayers are answered, though in a way they had not thought of. I believe our path will be made clear if we also pray.'

'It is hard to keep faith alight as one grows old, Belle, especially when the world goes against one. But your sermon has done me good, and I see something that will spirit me up still more. It is snowing! There will be a frost, and I shall be better-tempered. The damp brings on one's rheumatism, and that, as old Brown says, "do make one ter'ble cantankerous." And here comes the squire on horseback! Jim sees him, and runs after him to take his horse; and I will open the door. And now for the children's affairs. There is something to live for, after all.'

Belle hastened to stir the fire and

brush up the hearth, and, before she had finished, her father and Mr. Weatherley came in, the latter covered with snow-flakes.

'May I take your greatcoat?' said Belle; and he, with many apologies, took it off.

She carried it into the kitchen to dry, and left the two men together, thinking it wise to let them talk over matters uninterrupted by a third person. Marjory was carrying out her educational standards by making a pudding under Molly's superintendence, and Rover was asleep by the fire, with one paw thrown protectingly over a big black cat. Belle took Molly's place as instructress, and the pudding went smoothly on. Weatherley came smiling in, like his maternal grandfather, covered with snow-flakes, and Belle felt as if life were beginning again with wintry weather. Not so Flo, who entered shivering, enveloped in a large shawl, to ask who had arrived.

'The squire: and I have left him and father together,' said Belle. 'What is the matter, Flo?'

'I really can't say. I suppose I have worked too long in the cold over that sketch which father asked me to make of the house. It is to be sent to our new Cousin Arthur. He wants him to see the place where his father lived.'

Flo sat down on a hard kitchen chair and warmed herself, and Marjory said reflectively, while she rolled out her paste,

'I think grandfather means you to marry Cousin Arthur.'

'If you say that again, I will——' began Flo; but the rest of the sentence was smothered by Weatherley, who put his hand over her mouth.

Thus life asserted itself over the shadow of death.

Meanwhile the two grandfathers sat in the two easy-chairs on either side of the

dining-room fire. Molly had taken in a log, which was flaming brightly, and as the squire rubbed his hands over the blaze, and looked at the neat room and its well-polished furniture, he said, with a sigh,

'You have an excellent daughter, Dauncey. I am glad there is still a young lady left content to stay at home.'

'Marjory is just like her,' said Dauncey, with a pleased smile. 'She means to be a good housekeeper.'

Mr. Weatherley was a reserved man, and it took him some time to begin the subject that brought him to the farm. He opened it at last by suggesting that Weatherley should be sent to Harrow.

'I was at Harrow myself,' he said, 'and should like him to be educated there, if you have no objection. He can choose his line of life afterwards. He will, in the course of nature, succeed me at the Court,

but I should like him to have a profession. He can enter the army or the church or go to the Bar. I am sure he is clever and resolute.'

'Yes; and already quite a man,' returned Dauncey.

'My sister Margaretta thinks that it would be wise for all the children to come to the Court, before we finally settle our plans for them,' continued the squire, in a measured, nervous voice. 'They should become acquainted with their mother's home. She wishes me to ask you all to spend New Year's Day with us. We will have an early dinner; we will, if you consent, fetch you, and send you back. My sister Dulcey will come, and we can then make some definite arrangements for the future; that is to say, for the present, since the future is so uncertain, and you and I are not so young as we were. It is many years since last we met at the Court.'

'I am afraid I should not be equal to it. You are most kind, but——' stammered Dauncey, surprised by the invitation.

'Mamy talks constantly of you all, and should see her brother and sister. Margaretta is afraid to bring her here, lest she should wish to remain,' pleaded the squire. 'I little thought we should ever again have loved a child, but she is just what her mother was. I hope you will let her stay with us. We cannot part with her.'

His voice faltered, and Dauncey was also moved.

'Charlie wished you to have them all three, and said that they should not be separated. I relinquish my claim entirely. His last words were his last will,' said Dauncey, suddenly beginning to pace the room.

'It is unfortunate, but you cannot talk when seated, and all my ideas vanish when

people are moving about,' said the squire, rather irritably.

Dauncey begged his pardon, and sat down again. After a momentary pause, he was first to speak. He was in a penitent mood, and was resolved to continue the apologies he was making to Belle when the squire arrived.

'I am always unlucky. Whether I sit or stand, work or dawdle, stop at home or go abroad, I manage to do the wrong thing. I offended you because I did not interfere in the marriage of poor Charlie and Amy, and I have injured everyone belonging to me because I interfered in Jabez Dauncey's will. I have always been my own enemy, and therefore the enemy of my family. I suppose one can't be one's own enemy without being other people's.'

He paused for an answer.

'I suppose not,' said the squire.

'Very well. I wish to make friends with myself and the world generally, and spend the remainder of my days in universal good-fellowship. I beg your pardon, squire, for my stiff-neckedness towards you, and give our grandchildren—how old that word makes one feel!—into your hands, to "have and to hold," as the lawyers say. As I am too poor to keep them, there is no great condescension on my part, and I am only too thankful that you are so good and generous.'

'The boy has the merit, if there is any,' said Mr. Weatherley. 'I should never have come round but for him. I accept your son's legacy of his and Amy's children, and will do my duty by them, with God's help. We are neighbours, and, I hope, friends once more. We can share them if you wish——'

'No, no,' interrupted Dauncey. 'You have means, I have none. All I possess belongs to Pearce, and, if you don't put in your claim first, he will, maybe, turn us out of house and home.'

'I could not distrain, but I will see what can be done. If you get through this, you will promise never to speculate or borrow again?' said the squire.

'I have made so many promises in my time and broken them all, that I will make no more.'

'You can at least promise to spend New Year's Day with us? Let it be a family gathering and a day of reconciliation. You see I have paid my visit; you must return it.'

'I will consult Belle. The children and Flo shall go, they are used to society. We are not. We shouldn't know how to behave at the Court: and butler and footman would laugh at us. I still dislike

being laughed at. I am dreadfully thin-skinned, and, having no shell, can't hide myself like a snail.'

'Pshaw!' exclaimed the squire, who had put a great restraint on his pride to give the invitation, and who was unused to contradiction. 'I shall expect you all. Where is Miss Dauncey?'

'If you will excuse me, I will look for her.'

Dauncey found her and the rest of his family where he left them, in the kitchen. He hurried back to the squire without answering Flo's question as to what Mr. Weatherley wanted.

'If you don't mind following me, I will convince you that we are not fitting guests for the Court,' he said.

Mr. Weatherley followed, and, looking through the half-open door, saw the group we have already described.

Belle and Marjory rolling the paste,

Weatherley and Flo quarrelling about the American cousin; the dog and cat reposing in peace. Molly was clattering in the scullery, the snow was falling fast and soft over the outside world.

'May I come in, Miss Dauncey? Don't let me disturb you,' said the squire, with customary courtesy. 'I see my top-coat by the fire, and am much obliged to you for drying it.'

Belle advanced to meet him; Flo threw off the big shawl and rose majestic; Marjory jumped off the stool on which she was standing, and Weatherley seized his hand with delighted eagerness. He was pleased with his reception and the scene. There were no apologies, no awkwardness. All was natural as Belle herself. He repeated the invitation, and she, like her father, was doubtful as to accepting it. She thought it was early days since Charlie's death. She looked at her father.

'Do let us go, Aunt Belle,' cried the children; and 'It would be delightful,' said Flo.

'May Dolly come too?' asked Marjory.

'There is no doubt as to Flo and the young people,' said Dauncey. 'They shall be ready.'

'And Dolly?' interjected Marjory.

'And Dolly, of course,' said the squire. 'And Mr. and Miss Dauncey?' he added, interrogatively.

'Belle can go, but I cannot promise,' replied Dauncey; and this was all the concession the still half-offended squire could get from his old friend.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURT.

'When will they tome, auntie?' was Mamy's oft-repeated question on New Year's morning.

She was to and fro continually, from an oriel window to Miss Margaretta, who was seated near the fire. At last she stationed herself by the said window, a huge doll in her arms. She made a sweet little picture, her golden locks floating over her black frock, and her pretty face pressed against the glass. The setting of the picture was equally striking. The room in which she

and Miss Margaretta were located was an old-fashioned apartment, furnished handsomely in the style of a past generation. It was and had always been a morning-room for the ladies of the family, and the white and gold furniture and hangings of old gold satin had been originally placed there for the bridal home-coming of the present squire's grandmother. They were somewhat faded by age but, like Miss Margaretta, looked none the worse for that. The floor was strewn with toys, New Year cards, and various modern presents given to Mamy that auspicious morn.

Miss Margaretta was in slight mourning, for had not Charlie been her nephew by marriage, and were not old animosities vanishing before the scythe of the universal leveller? She sat with her foot on the fender, reclining in an easy-chair, and reflecting. Work and books were on a small table at her elbow, and a handsome carved

screen, in which was embroidery done by her niece, partially shielding her from the huge Christmas fire. At another call from Mamy she rose, took the child on her knee, and sat shivering before the window.

It was no longer a green Christmas, but a white one. The outer world was covered with frozen snow, and every branch of every tree in the park was bound by hoar frost and icicles as if by iron bands. The scene without was fair and pure as those who watched it so closely—the white-haired lady and the golden-headed child. They were very happy together, and Mamy expressed no wish to leave the Court, though she talked much of her friends, and wanted to see them.

'Here they are at last! I feared an obstruction,' said the squire, suddenly breaking into the room.

Mamy clapped her hands as she perceived a carriage making its way through

the deep snow. Her grandfather lifted her from his sister's knees and carried her into the hall; Miss Margaretta followed. The hall was what is called 'baronial' in size and fittings, and opened upon a handsome flight of steps, before which the carriage soon pulled up. The servants were in attendance, and in a few seconds Flo, Dolly, Marjory, and Weatherley were in the hall. Marjory seized upon Mamy, and the others shook hands heartily. Flo looked her best, which was certainly supremely elegant and pretty, while the children were rosy and bright as a frosty morn could make them.

'My father is sorry not to come,' said Flo, at a question from the squire. 'He is not very well, and does not seem equal to leaving home. My sister also sends her apologies, and thinks she must stay with my father.'

'I expected as much,' said Mr. Wea-

therley; and Flo felt that he was displeased. Turning to his sister, however, he added, 'You will see to the young ladies. I want to show Weatherley the place before luncheon. You will not object to a walk, my boy?'

'I shall like it, of all things,' replied Weatherley, and, with great delight, accompanied his grandfather for the projected walk.

Nothing could be more exhilarating than the air, and it would be difficult to say which enjoyed it most; for the squire was hale and hearty, and loved the frost. He took his grandson first to a spot whence they could best see the house. It was a long, many-windowed, balustraded mansion in the Queen Anne style—a style revived under Queen Victoria—and had been in the Weatherley family since the reign of the first-mentioned monarch. Then they went for a brisk walk through

the woods, and finally returned to the neighbourhood of the house. Gardens, stables, outbuildings were cursorily visited, and Weatherley conceived a grand opinion of the Court and its accessories; he had only seen them at a distance before. During their walk the conversation had chiefly been on general topics, and the squire drew from the lad much concerning his parents and the Daunceys, incidentally. He could not but be pleased with his straightforward, manly answers to his questions; and when at last they came to a halt in the stable where his favourite horse, Silverking, was warmly sheltered from the outer cold, he said, laying one hand on the steed, the other on the shoulder of the boy,

'We are indebted in part to Silverking, in part to your intrepidity, for our acquaintance. Had he not been frisky and you bold, it would have ended where it

began—at the vicarage. The past six months have been eventful to us both.'

'Yes, sir. We have lost my dear father,' said Weatherley.

'And found a grandfather. Call me by that name. If you were to come into this property, would you make a good use of it?' asked the squire.

'I would try,' replied the boy, humbly.

'It is not entailed, and you are the natural heir. I think we understand one another, and that you do not reproach me for the past. You must return to the Court some day this week—tell Mr. Dauncey so; but he is not conciliatory—and you must get accustomed to us before going to Harrow at the beginning of the next term, as they call it. Mamy is with us already; the other little girl——'

The squire paused to remember her name.

'Marjory, grandfather,' supplied Wea-

therley. 'But she wishes to stay with Aunt Belle.'

'That will be best, for the present at least,' said the squire, relieved, for as yet he scarcely knew Marjory. 'It would be unfeeling to remove you all at once, though you are all three a legacy to me, and I shall hope to provide for you.'

'Thank you, sir. Poor mother would be glad. She wished me to go to a public school, and a fellow has a chance of distinguishing himself there. If father only knew! But perhaps he does.'

Weatherley's voice faltered as he spoke the foregoing words. He felt a little aggrieved for his dear Marjory, who was, he knew, the best of children, and his heart sank as he remembered his father, so lately hidden from his sight in that far-off cemetery.

'You must make friends with Silverking,' said the squire, patting his horse;

'and then we must go in to luncheon. There is the bell.'

The squire gave him some oats, which the petted and somewhat pampered animal ate out of his hands; and when Weatherley put his arm fearlessly round his neck, and received in return an equine token of friendship, his grandfather was satisfied.

While they had been surveying the place out of doors, Miss Margaretta was entertaining her guests in the house, or rather, Mamy was, for she had become mistress of the mansion. Miss Dulcey had arrived, seated alone in the big coach. The squire had arranged to send the carriage twice, first for the youngsters, secondly for the elders. As we have seen, he was disappointed of two of his invited guests, but Miss Dulcey joined his family party.

Mamy did the honours of the nursery that had once been her mother's. She, Marjory, and Dolly were soon engaged with

a doll's house almost big enough for a dwelling for Mamy; and Marjory remembered how that the mother who had once occupied the room used to tell her about this same mimic mansion. She almost knew its contents by heart.

While they were thus engaged, Miss Dulcey took Flo through the principal rooms, just to show her, as she said, where she was bred and born.

'It is a fine, desolate old place,' she commented. 'I should have turned it into an orphanage for the offspring of runaway matches. That is the only class of babes that I know of unrepresented.'

'Mr. Weatherley is carrying out your idea, Miss Dulcey. I only wish I were one of the orphans,' said Flo, who was amazed at the dreary grandeur of the various apartments.

'It is dull enough now, but children will soon enliven it,' returned Miss Dulcey.

'Mamy has made Margaretta quite young, and, as to Hewson, he is so foolish about the child, I am afraid he is getting into his dotage.'

These scattered members of the New Year's party all assembled for luncheon. It was served in state in the large dining-room, and would have been a stiff and solemn meal but for Miss Dulcey. She turned it into quite an uproarious festivity, and, aided by Flo, set the young folk entirely at their ease, and astonished the master and mistress of the mansion, who had been so long unaccustomed to children. Flo divided her two nieces on one side of the table, and Weatherley, his dear Dolly, and his Aunt Dulcey on the other. Fortunately there was no breach either of etiquette or good manners, and the squire was well pleased by the conduct of his grandchildren. In short, the good cheer

disappeared without mishap, and Miss Dulcey said to Flo, when the dreaded meal was over,

'Our orphanage has started well. The offspring of our runaway match might compete with any of their rival institutions.'

Perhaps the most successful part of the day was yet to come. The afternoon was spent in music and games, improvised by Miss Dulcey. Flo played and sang, to the real pleasure of the squire, who was musical; Marjory and Dolly showed off their acquirements in an elaborate pianoforte duet; and Mamy went through her repertoire of childish ditties, to the enchantment of the elders. But when she suddenly burst forth with 'Tarley is my darling, my darling, my darling,' silence fell upon the scene, and tears filled the eyes.

'It seemed almost like forgetting father,'

whispered Marjory to Weatherley, 'but Mamy remembers.'

'He always liked to see us happy,' returned the boy.

'Let's have "truckle the trencher"; we used to play it when we were young,' cried Miss Dulcey, suddenly rising.

They were in the drawing-room, and the tables were soon pushed aside to make space. If there was any childish fear or reserve, it disappeared when the squire and Miss Margaretta joined in the game. They resisted at first, but Mamy's 'Tome,' and a tug from her tiny hand, overcame them. Of course they were the most frequently called for, and the squire, who was slightly inclined to corpulence, declared himself quite done up.

And, after all this feasting and excitement, there was still tea. Miss Margaretta had ordered it to be laid on a huge round table in the breakfast-room, and, when it

was announced, she was in the centre of the room holding the trencher in her hand. Mamy was pulling at her skirt, and saying, 'Tall me, auntie,' and the rest were in anxious expectation. Much disappointment was expressed at leaving the forfeits unredeemed; but the call to tea was imperative. Miss Margaretta and Mamy led the way hand in hand, the rest followed.

The centre of the round table was groaning under dainties of all descriptions, its circumference under presents. On every plate stood quite a pyramid of gifts, on the summit of which was the name of the receiver. Aunt Margaretta was the fairy godmother. She knew little of Christmas-trees or stockings; but she was well acquainted with New Year's gifts, and she lavished them unsparingly on her friends

'I was not able to place them on the breakfast-table, so I put them on the tea-table instead,' she said.

The day came to an end with the high tea and the presents, for the one took time to partake of, the other to examine. At eight o'clock the carriage was announced. Miss Dulcey managed to find a seat with Flo and the children, so that it had only to make one journey. The squire drew Flo aside, and, after thanking her for her visit, bade her tell her father that he was much disappointed at his non-appearance; also that he hoped Weatherley would take up his abode at the Court during the current week. He hesitated as he made some allusion to Marjory.

'What of her education?' he asked.

'I am afraid it might be improved, for I am her coach,' answered Flo, with a laugh. 'She learns with Dolly, and I am —well, daily governess is the word, I suppose.'

Marjory came to wish her grandfather good-night.

'Would you like to come and live with us, or would you prefer remaining with your aunts?' he said, almost stiffly.

'I—I—like to be with them dearly; but I want Mamy,' she replied, beginning to cry.

The puzzled squire began to feel his legacy a weight. But Marjory put up her cheek for a kiss, while Mamy came trotting towards her with the words, 'Me do with Marjy.' And he said hurriedly to Flo,

'They must not be separated.'

For that night at least they were parted, since sleepy little Mamy was carried off to bed, and Weatherley and Marjory, under endless rugs, seated on either side their friend Dolly in the roomy carriage. Opposite them were Miss Dulcey and Flo, and not all their tact could console Marjory for what seemed to her a separation from Mamy.

It was a glorious night. The moon and

stars shone down upon the snow-clad, frost-bound earth; the sky was of a clear, dark, impenetrable blue; the trees were a wondrous maze of fretwork and icicles. Weatherley drew Marjory's attention to these miracles of nature, and her tears gradually ceased.

'All will come right. Father said so,' he whispered, and put his hand in hers.

Miss Dulcey was dropped first, then Dolly, and finally Flo and the children. The presents were so numerous that it took some time to disgorge them and their owners from the carriage. Mr. Dauncey and Belle came out to receive their contingent, and Molly followed with mugs of hot spiced cider for the coachman and footman, for it was bitterly cold.

'Good-night, and thank you,' said Weatherley to the servants, who augured well from this little speech.

When the events of the day had been

fully detailed, the presents displayed, and the squire's messages delivered, the children went to bed.

'That is over!' ejaculated Mr. Dauncey. 'Now, Flo, tell us what the squire means to do with the children.'

'His last words were, "They must not be separated,"' replied Flo.

'Thank God!' said her father, reverently; 'for the worst has come. Pearce has foreclosed, and we are really ruined at last. I have cried "wolf" for many a year, and now he is at the door.'

Poor Flo was bewildered. She had met her father in good spirits, and was soon at zero again. The fact was that during the day a regular lawyer's letter had arrived from Pearce, requesting the payment of all the mortgages and loans, and threatening proceedings if the money was not forthcoming by a certain day.

'We must face it,' said practical Belle,

who had been doing her best to reconcile her father to the inevitable.

And they did face it bravely. Mr. Dauncey was put on his mettle at last, and declared that he would sell all he possessed, and pay off Pearce; then he would begin life again. His children were also roused. Belle, of course, who knew she might have prevented it; Flo from very indignation. They resolved not to mention the circumstances until the fate of the children was finally settled. A letter arrived from Miss Weatherley, which determined this. It contained the squire's ultimatum. It seemed that Mamy had been crying for Marjory, and he was aware of it. He had requested his sister to invite her to accompany Weatherley, nominally on a visit, but really, if he liked her as well as the others, and if Mr. Dauncey agreed to it, to remain with them.

Belle replied to this letter, and said that

circumstances had occurred which made this arrangement most desirable, and that the children should be ready during the week. She begged Miss Margaretta to fix the day. That lady wrote again, and named the following Saturday.

'Sharp's the word!' said Dauncey. 'I never thought to have been glad to give Charlie's children over into the squire's care. But he can provide for them—I can't.'

Marjory was pining for Mamy, and, when told she was invited to stay at the Court, made no objection, but maintained her resolution of returning to live with Aunt Belle. Events crowded so quickly on one another that Belle could scarcely keep pace with them, but she was thankful to think the children would be sheltered before the final crash came. Miss Margaretta had begged that they should come to her as they were, and that Belle would not trouble

to procure any sort of outfit; she little knew how impossible that would have been.

'I shall be more helpful to grandfather when I have had an education; but I can't bear to leave you, dear Aunt Belle,' said Weatherley, whose heart was torn by many conflicting hopes and fears.

Belle's was still more sadly rent, and when on the appointed day, the carriage once more pulled up at the door, she felt that it must break.

'They are not going to the Antipodes—only to a delightful place three miles off,' said Flo, cheerfully, when Belle embraced the children over and over again. 'Dry your eyes, Marjory, or the squire will think you a hypocrite.'

In spite of this sally and the prospective benefits to accrue to the children, it was a sad parting; but no sooner was it over and the carriage outside the farm gates than Mr. Dauncey said,

'Now, Belle, we will go straight to Harborough, and see Martin, the auctioneer, and have the bills out at once. Pearce shall learn that we mean business. After that, if the property doesn't yield enough to pay him, we will sell up here. He has had the grace not to send the bailiffs. Nobody knows about it but ourselves. I could not tell the squire or Miss Dulcey, for it would be like begging. But I have a mind to make a confidant of Arthur Dauncey.'

'That would also look like begging, father. We had better go through with it,' said Belle.

So they started for Orchardson Station, whence they would take train for Harborough.

When they were gone, Flo's pent-up feelings gave way. She sat down in her father's chair and began to cry. Molly came in, who partly guessed at the trouble,

and tried to comfort her by crying heartily with her.

'Come you, Miss Flo, fach,' she said, with her strongest Welsh accent. 'Everybody do say you'll be marrying a lord, and then ——Here he is, I s'pose,' as a grand treble knock resounded.

She went to the door, and returned, saying a strange gentleman was there, who asked for Miss Flora Dauncey.

'Say I cannot see him. But no; perhaps it is—it may be——' she said, hesitating, and rising to meet the visitor, whom Molly showed in.

'Mr. Mute!' she exclaimed, with tone and manner of such genuine delight that no one, whether lover or friend, could have desired a warmer welcome.

She held out both hands, which were taken and fervently pressed, then she sank back into the chair she had vacated, and continued the interrupted 'good cry' she

had begun before the visitor had arrived. She was always in the seventh heaven of delight or the purgatory of despair.

'What is the matter?' said Mr. Mute, drawing a chair to her side—he was quite as good-looking as she had described him.

'I am so—so—very glad to see you,' she sobbed. 'But—but—we are in such trouble! We are ruined, and my father and sister are just gone to have bills printed to advertise the sale of all we possess.'

'I think I must have passed them; but they were on foot, and I had a cab. I wanted to see you alone, so I am very lucky,' said Mr. Mute, philosophically. 'I should have been here months ago, but for certain hindrances. You remember I promised to follow you when we parted in Italy?'

'I remember; and I had quite given you up,' said Flo, recovering her natural manner, and smiling, in spite of her tears.

'Not quite, surely? Did you not believe in me? I had hoped that, although I was all but unknown to you, you would not forget me, and would esteem me honest. I have been thinking of you continually.'

'And I of you,' said Flo, involuntarily.

These few words sufficed. It is needless to add that Flo wholly forgot that odious name of Mute, forgot to inquire into his family and circumstances, forgot that her friend and chaperon was afraid that he was an adventurer, forgot everything, in short, but that she was really attached to him. He was not so oblivious. When he was assured that she had not forgotten him, but had been anxiously expecting him day by day, he said what all honourable, straightforward men are supposed to say,

'I will wait here till your father's return, and then I will speak to him. I don't think he will object to me.'

'But suppose we are quite sold up? I

should be a pauper,' said Flo, clasping her hands.

'That would not matter,' returned Mr. Mute, doubtless thinking that even a pauper, with Flo's beauty and manifold attractions, might be worth the winning.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. MUTE.

When Mr. Dauncey and Belle were passing the wayside public-house, at some little distance from the village of Hollyfield, they were invited by the driver of the fly that had brought Mr. Mute to a lift. He was baiting his horse, preparatory to returning to Orchardson, and warming his inner man at the same time. The hard frost continued, and snow still lay upon roads and meadows. The invitation was gladly accepted, and Mr. Dauncey exclaimed, as they got into the fly,

'A good augury, Belle. A bit of luck to begin with;' and Belle rejoiced to see pleasure on her father's face once more. Like Flo, he was easily cheered or depressed.

Thanks to the lift, they reached Orchardson station about two o'clock, and, to Belle's surprise and delight, there was her friend Mr. Mulready. Dauncey was almost as glad to see him as she was, and the greetings were hearty all round. He insisted on their coming into his parlour to wait for the train, which was not due for nearly half-an-hour. The drive had expedited their movements. Dauncey began at once to detail his grievances. He forgot his caution, and told Mulready the exact state of his affairs. He had not only lost the fortune, but was about to be ruined out and out. Mulready looked at Belle, who could not contradict the statement.

'Do not proceed to Harborough to-day,'

he said, earnestly. 'I have a plan. I have come into some money by the death of my brother at New York. I reached that city just in time to see him. It is at your disposal. If you decide to give up Castle Farm, I will take it; I only came back last night, and haven't matured my plans; but I beg of you not to proceed to Harborough to-day. I have no time for explanations, because I have to settle up here before finally relinquishing my post. Tudor, my substitute, has been obliged to go down the line, and I am alone for the hour. Trust me in this matter. I am sure you can get honourably through this difficulty if you will wait a day or two before proceeding to extremities. Miss Dauncey, will you not second me?'

'Yes. Father, I am sure Mr. Mulready is our true friend, and would not say what he does not believe. Let us wait at least till Monday,' said Belle.

'I will not borrow another penny as long as I live. I have had enough of loans and mortgages,' cried Dauncey, the obstinate look on his face.

'You need not,' argued Mulready. 'I only ask you to delay till Monday. If you will do so, I will try to run over this evening and explain more fully my plans. Dear Miss Dauncey, don't let Pearce triumph. We can certainly circumvent him amongst us.'

'I wish we could,' said poor Belle, who felt like a culprit.

'The train will soon be here. You must not go—you shall not go,' said Mulready; while Dauncey looked from one to the other. 'Get into the fly again and go back. I am certain you can surmount your difficulties without being either sold up or obliged to leave Castle Farm. You are not fit to encounter either Pearce or the auctioneer. You look ill, and

have had too much upon you of late.'

'That's true enough. I will follow your advice, if you will fulfil your promise and come over to-night. There is only Sunday between Saturday and Monday, and 't isn't long to wait.'

Dauncey laughed grimly, and hurried through the now desolate little garden to the fly at its top. Mulready and Belle followed.

'If Tudor comes back in time, I will be with you to supper,' he said; and, to the amazement of the driver, ordered him to return to Hollyfield.

'I don't understand it, Belle,' said Dauncey, when they were again on their way.

'Nor do I,' returned Belle, and thought of Mulready.

They scarcely spoke again during their drive; indeed, Dauncey fell asleep, to Belle's comfort.

When they reached home they were met in the hall by Flo. She dragged them into the parlour and shut the door.

'Mr. Mute is here, and we are engaged to be married,' she cried. 'He is waiting to see you, father.'

'Not so fast, Miss Flo. I have promised you to Arthur Dauncey. Why, this is the man with the unmarriageable name.'

'It is very ugly; but he has promised to change it. And, as you know, I could never marry a Yankee.'

Mr. Dauncey was amused and consoled by this announcement of his darling Flo. Belle was confounded. She insisted on their coming straight into the dining-room, where, she said, Mr. Mute was awaiting them. Even now she made a little grimace at the name. It was late in the afternoon, and the twilight was deepening. The fire was low, and, when Flo

announced; somewhat dramatically, 'This is Mr. Mute, father,' Dauncey could not see him.

'Here is my sister Belle,' she added, as Mr. Mute came forward with extended hand.

Belle took it, but Dauncey drew back; he suddenly remembered that he knew nothing of this man who had, it seemed, engaged himself to his daughter.

'Won't you shake hands?' said Mr. Mute.

Dauncey started. He thought he knew the voice.

'Don't you know me?' said Mr. Mute.

'Arthur Dauncey!' exclaimed the older man.

The American cousin and the Mute were identical.

A scene of great excitement ensued. Mr. Dauncey was quite overcome, and as to Flo, she was beside herself. But

they grew calm by degrees, and Belle lighted candles, and made up the fire, to enable them to see and welcome this strange relative, who, by claiming his birthright, had put the finishing stroke to the family calamities. Mulready was wise when he advised delay.

'Flo tells me I have come just in time, uncle,' said Arthur, when the confusion had subsided. 'It was lucky that my fears for you and my love for Flo would not let me rest. I put Stint and Co. in office, giving them full power to manage my affairs, and started again for New York, whence I steamed across the Atlantic about a week after you. I found Mulready on board, whom I knew abroad, and we reached Orchardson station together last night. As my cousins know, I have been there before, and should have come on here had not Mulready told me of the death of my poor father, and your de-

parture from England as his supposed heir.'

A cloud passed over Arthur's face as he mentioned his father. Mr. Dauncey, seeing it, was prompted to make an inquiry which he had not liked to make previously. He had heard from Stint and Co. that there had been a quarrel between father and son, but no one knew exactly the cause of it.

'Why did you leave your father? Why did you change your name?' he asked.

'I could not bring myself to join him in his business. I am sorry to say his reputation was not quite clean, but you will not ask me to malign him. Had it been as pure as yours, I should not have done otherwise, for I disliked business and wanted a profession, which he refused to allow me money to follow. He had given me a first-class education. You may remember that he was hot-tempered, and

one day, after a discussion that was final on my part, in which I was led to speak unadvisedly, and to say that I would not soil my fingers in any trade that I was not sure was honest, he bade me go about my business, and never come near him again. I was tired of the perpetual disputes, and obeyed only too readily. I ought to have remained in spite of them. I had a little annuity left me by my mother, whose maiden name was Mute,'—here Arthur glanced at Flo,—'and in my haste and anger I assumed her name, and left Montreal for Europe. But I wrote constantly to my father, receiving no answer. My mother was an angel, and taught me to shun evil company, and to be truthful and straightforward; but I fear I have not always followed her counsel. When I saw Mulready's devotion to his father, my conscience smote me, and I wrote to mine, offering to return to him,

and to do his bidding if possible. But he vouchsafed no reply. My mother once told me that he had forsaken his English home and relations, and had entirely lost sight of them for some slight offence. She did not know where they lived.'

'That is true,' broke in Dauncey. 'He took offence, ran away, and never wrote to any of us.'

'He had the character of being unforgiving,' continued Arthur; 'but that is no excuse for my not returning to him, and, when I heard of his death from Mulready, the news overcame me.'

'Had you not seen the advertisement for the next-of-kin?' asked Belle, who was not quite satisfied with the explanation, being herself so dutiful.

'No. I was taken ill soon after your sister left Italy, and such journals as I read either did not contain the advertisement, or else did not attract my attention.

I never read the advertising column, so it is not wonderful that it escaped me, and, as my name of Dauncey was not known abroad, no one drew my attention to it.'

'What made you take to Flo?' asked Mr. Dauncey.

'First I saw her face, then I heard her name,' he replied, with a look at Flo very satisfactory to Flo's father and sister. 'I discovered that she must be connected, if remotely, with my father's relatives, and resolved to follow her to England. Illness prevented me at first, and you know the rest.'

'You would not have come to us with a feigned name?' said Belle, not yet satisfied.

'No. I intended to resume my own name, and to throw myself on your father's kindness. I even wrote to my father to tell him I had, I believed, found one of his connections, and this last letter

I discovered in his desk. He must have received it not long before his death. I am thankful that I said also that I meant to return to Canada, and hoped he would condone the past. I should have done so, I think, as soon as I had seen you all, under any circumstances.'

'It is a strange story. Too romantic for me,' said Dauncey. 'Jabez was always a queer customer, and never seemed to have a conscience. He would do anything for money, and I can understand that he scraped his millions together anyhow. What do you mean to do with them?'

In answer to this abrupt question, Arthur took Flo's hand for answer. This was to show that he hoped to share them with her. But he did not say so.

'The first thing I mean to do,' he replied, 'is to repay you the debt my father owed your father and you. It must have accumulated fivefold by this time. Flo

tells me you are in difficulties. The lawyer she mentions must be paid at once, out and out. I have already written to him to this effect, Flo supplying paper, pen, envelope, and address. I found her in tears, and thought this was the best way to wipe them off. It didn't take long to write the letter, send it to the post, and convince her that, although I had such a distasteful name, I could stay these proceedings. But I did not let her read the letter, nor my signature of Arthur Dauncey, next-of-kin.'

'Is it not delightful? Is it not like a fairy tale?' cried Flo, running to her father and kissing him.

'It is very—very—providential,' stammered Mr. Dauncey, taking out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes, moist with tears. 'Thank God for all His mercies, and—His chastisements. He has taken our Charlie to Himself and—Amy—and He has given

me—another son. I am, indeed, most unworthy.'

He gave way to his emotion, and Belle burst into tears. The restraint she had laid on herself that day had nearly paralysed her powers, and when it relaxed she almost fainted. She could not speak, but she put her hand in Arthur's, and he said, as he pressed it,

'All will be well.'

And all was well. When Mulready arrived he found there was no need of his offered loan. Indeed, he knew as much before he proposed to lend. Mr. Dauncey's difficulties were about to end; for he had no compunction in accepting what was all but his due—compensation for his Cousin Jabez's shortcomings. He would need no more borrowings, with a son-in-law as rich as Crœsus, and as generous as he was rich. He recovered his spirits at supper; and Flo found it difficult to parry his jests

concerning her preference, after all, for a Yankee and a Mute. When they drew round the fire after supper, he observed that Mulready seated himself near Belle, and that she did not withdraw from him as she had always done from Pearce; on the contrary, she seemed quite pleased with his attentions. He asked himself if he were to lose Belle as well as Flo, and the thought induced his old habit of getting up to pace the room. But he sat down again when Mulready told them that his uncle had received him very kindly, and that he would be able to settle in some mode of life more congenial than that of station-master.

'I shall give up the farm, and go to America with Arthur and Flo,' said Dauncey, half in jest, half in earnest. 'I can hand it over to you, if the squire consents.'

'My future depends on your daughter,' rejoined Mulready, hesitating, for he and

Belle understood one another, and did not need to beat about the bush.

'You must ask her godmother, Miss Dulcey; she rules the parish, and manages Belle, which is more than I have been able to do, since Belle manages me. I wish you all joy, and pray God to bless you, and forgive my manifold sins and iniquities.'

Saying this, Mr. Dauncey rose hastily, and, before even Belle could intercept him, left the room. He marched straight into the kitchen, where Molly was finishing up her Saturday's work. Whatever Mr. Dauncey's human weaknesses, he 'Remembered the Sabbath day and kept it holy,' so that no work, not absolutely necessary, was done on Sunday. The kitchen was clean, the fire bright, Molly good-natured; so he sat down and began to talk.

'When are you and Ben going to church together?' he asked. 'Marriage is fashion-

able just now—at least, engagements are.'

'I am not meaning to marry so long as Miss Belle is single; and I am telling Ben so,' replied Molly.

'I think you may soon put Ben out of his misery, then. What do you think of Mr. Mulready?'

'I am not liking him so well as Pearce the lawyer. He do have plenty of money, and Mulready is thinking of nothing but flowers. Hach, master, one can't be living on flowers, no more than on butter without bread. But here's a grand young gentleman Miss Flo have got!'

'He has plenty of money, at any rate. I advise you to take Ben while he is willing and can keep you. Poverty is the mischief. Good-night, Molly. Tell them I am tired and have gone to bed, and that I feel sure they will excuse me under the circumstances. Don't forget to say "under the circumstances."'

'No, sir. "'Scuse you under the circumstances."'

Mr. Dauncey went to bed, but not to sleep. He heard the fly drive away that took Mulready and Arthur to the station; he heard his daughters steal quietly upstairs to their room; he heard the church clock strike often. He was reviewing his past life, and counting over his present mercies. In spite of his many misfortunes, mistakes, and errors, God had been gracious to him, and much good had come out of seeming evil. The events of that day alone proved this. He prayed earnestly for a thankful and resigned spirit, and for the blessing of the Almighty on his children and grandchildren, so wonderfully provided for. The words 'Poor Charlie!' were on his lips when, at last, he fell asleep.

Miss Dulcey's consent to her dear goddaughter's engagement with Mr. Mulready

was obtained, and given all the more readily when it was ascertained that he was a gentleman, respectably connected, and not devoid of means. It pleased her to find that he and Belle had been, for some time, sincerely attached to one another, and that it was a proper *bona-fide* attachment, and not, as she phrased it, 'a romance, like Flo's.' The romance was brought to a somewhat hasty finale, because it was reckoned best not to bring Arthur Dauncey over from America again for the marriage, but to consummate it while he was now in England. He dawdled on for a month or so, to enable Flo to procure her trousseau, and to put a sufficient period between Charlie's death and the wedding, to satisfy what Miss Dulcey called 'the proprieties.'

Everybody cast off their mourning on the windy March morning when Flo was wed, and everybody was at Hollyfield

Church to see her in bridal attire, with Belle, her two little nieces, and Dolly as bridesmaids. 'She could not have less than four,' she said, and 'Never was there so lovely a bride or pretty a wedding in Hollyfield Church before,' said the spectators. Her father gave her away, Mulready was best man, and Mr. Burmester married them; what could even the ambitious Flo desire more—except, perhaps, a bishop?

Arthur Dauncey scattered his gold like a prince, and all Hollyfield was the better for the jollifications that succeeded the important event. Everybody was feasted, and the squire and Miss Margaretta honoured the breakfast with their presence. Miss Dulcey was the life of the gathering, and, seeing that Flo was to leave home for another continent, life was needed.

She and her bridegroom went for a tour

on the continent before they left Europe for Canada, and Mr. Dauncey promised to pay them a visit when 'Belle was settled,' as he expressed it; a promise he subsequently fulfilled.

He and Belle returned to their old ways when the excitement was over. Mulready went north to settle his affairs with his uncle, and the children remained in the care of their maternal grandfather. Weatherley was at Harrow when the marriage took place, and it was contemplated to have a governess for the little girls. They were frequently at the farm, and no further disagreement arose between the squire and Dauncey. Arthur had paid up the rent, satisfied Pearce, and settled a handsome annuity on Dauncey; in other words, repaid him the money his father owed him, so he chose to put it.

Belle desired nothing better than to live

on at Castle Farm. Mulready took it of the squire, ostensibly for Mr. Dauncey, really for himself, and Mr. Weatherley, who esteemed him greatly, joined him in restoring the old place to something of its original status, when it had been known as Hollyfield Manor House. The gardens that he and Belle planned and laid out were worthy of them, and the untidy paddock in front was converted into a lawn, which rejoiced the squire almost as much as Belle and Miss Dulcey.

A year intervened between Charlie's death and Belle's marriage. Weatherley was allowed, at his own particular request, to come home for this happy event. He was doing well at Harrow, and his grandfather was very proud of him. Once more the nieces and Dolly accompanied the bride to church, though less elaborately dressed than when they attended Flo.

Belle's steps were followed by the prayers of the poor, whose one united word of rejoicing was, 'She will come back.' A bright autumnal morning saw her little bridal party walk along the gravelled path beneath the old castle, and 'Belle's bower' was a mass of many-tinted leaves—russet-browns, ruby-reds, golden-yellows; and the robin piped a marriage ditty as she passed it. She could but think of her parting from Charlie, and her meeting with her father—so intimately are joy and sorrow mingled in the reflective soul. Of course Miss Dulcey made one of the picturesque procession; and she and Mr. Burmester returned to the simple meal prepared by Molly and a friend, for her beloved Miss Belle. Mr. Dauncey was not to be left alone, for Marjory had asked her kind Aunt Margaretta to let her pay him a visit during the absence of Belle. She and

Molly were looking forward to this with much pleasure, for Marjory preferred the farm to the Court, though she did not say so, and was very happy in her more exalted station. Molly stuck to her resolution that she would not console Ben for his long and silent waiting until Miss Belle returned from a visit to Mulready's friends in the north; and Miss Dulcey, as a reward for her constancy, adorned and enlarged the coachman's small house at the back of the Gables.

Having already witnessed two weddings, we must leave hers to the imagination of the readers.

But we cannot quite forget the personal gratification of joining all the men, women, and children of Hollyfield in welcoming Belle and her husband back to their home. Never did the bells peal out more joyously than when the station fly, that old ac-

quaintance of Mulready's, drove up the village, and never was there a lustier shout than that given by the children who had just come out of school. In spite of the new lawn, the peacock was there to receive her with its tail spread out to its utmost width, almost like an old-fashioned lady with a hoop, and Miss Dulcey was first to hop out and welcome her, hand-in-hand with Marjory. Never was good daughter more lovingly embraced by affectionate father; and certainly never before was mistress so hugged by an old servant.

'Will nobody kiss me?' said Mulready, who had to make his way in the good favour of the neighbours.

'I will,' cried Marjory. 'You are my uncle now.'

'And I suppose you are my godson,' said Miss Dulcey. 'I hope you will be as good as my goddaughter.'

'I will try,' returned Mulready, using the same sentence Weatherley had spoken when he first went to the Court.

And both of them kept their word.

THE END.

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